

icing those hurts

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| Fandom: | Dream SMP |
| Relationship: | Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) & Other(s) , Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity & TommyInnit , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit , Jschlatt & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu & Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo |
| Character: | TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Alexis Quackity , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu , The coach , not dream - Character |
| Additional Tags: | TommyInnit Angst (Video Blogging RPF) , Hurt/Comfort , Alternate Universe - Olympics , Older Siblings Wilbur Soot and Technoblade , Sapnap is Bad at Feelings (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) he needs five of them. srsly, Overworking , Verbal Abuse , Healing , Hurt TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Alternate Universe - Hockey , they are jocks who care so much about one figure skater bc the figure skater can't care about himself , Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit Friendship , Ranboo & TommyInnit Friendship (Video Blogging RPF) , Sleepy Cuddles , Anxiety Attacks , tub and ranboo snowboard bc like. vibes , Angst with a Happy Ending , Wilbur Soot Needs a Hug , ice schlatt is v precious to me if u couldnt tell , BAMF Niki Nihachu , Ice Skating , Figure Skater TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , guys please dream isn't the coach :sobs: , I'd tag it if he was I swear!! |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 6 of Anything and Everything , Part 1 of from ice to water |
| Collections: | Sadness whats that , A fic to remember , Words cannot express my love , dirty little tommyinnit kinnie , Favorites , Completed stories I've read , lee's favorite fics that you should definitely read as well :) , Sleepy Bois (StarlingNova) , sbi my beloved , Finished and Amazing , Comfort fics , Favourites , rw tommy angst , Found family to make me feel something , All My Favorites , block game , Fic's to read when all else fails , listen it's 3am and i'm crying i don't know what you expected from me , OwO , what's this a re-read? , the reason i'm an insomniac , phoenix's mcyt fics <3 , crimeboys and co but its all fluff except when its sometimes not Sbi!! /pos, Fanfics I'd eat again at 3 am and already have , God tier fics for 4 am , fics that have a chokehold on me /pos, Re-readables , I would give you all my kudos :O , fics that go spectacularly with red wine and garlic bread , bees fics for ariel , bee's personal picks , absolutely amazing stunning 10/10 , minecraft fics that make my brainworms happy , Yeah but we we though you were mental you were talking to |

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by [Drhair76](#), [plantform](#)

Summary

“And everyone is so old,” Tubbo complains. Somehow, without them knowing about it, Tubbo’s managed to swipe a waffle and is chewing on it happily. Sapnap stifles a laugh. “Well, not everyone, I guess- the kid in our room is our age, I think. He might be younger.”

Wilbur perks up. “Does he ice skate?”

“Yeah, he does. He’s got these sick skates and everything.” Tubbo explains. “He’s quiet though. We tried talking to him, but...”

“But?”

Tubbo shrugs. "He's quiet. He doesn't talk much. I guess he's busy."

or, Tommy's made it to the Olympics for figure skating- he's the youngest contestant on the ice and he's the favor for the gold. He's supposed to be living the dream. So why is he still so unhappy? And why do all these hockey players and snowboarders care so much about him?

Notes

i know two things about the olympics - i know that they happen and i know i watch three of the events- figure skating, gymnastics and swimming. sorry to any sport buffs reading this, i just wanted to project onto tommy (EYE ROLL)

also don't tell me the olympics don't happen in alaska, i know, i don't care, i did a lot of alaska research at the beginning of the year and i needed to put it to use <3 i love alaska and YOU WILL TOO.

(also dream isn't in this, he IS NOT the coach, he's just not there lol)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

At first there were too many branches so he cut them and then it was winter. *He meaning you.* Yes.

...

As soon as they're off the bus, Wilbur is throwing his arms out and breathing in the fresh, clean, crisp air.

"Smell that, Techno?" He asks. Techno, who has not a care in the world for anything Wilbur enjoys, just hums and walks over to the side hatch to get his luggage out the pit. "That's the smell of the mountains. Of pure winter and ice. That's the smell of victory."

"Someone remind Soot that he is an ice hockey player, not a poet," Schlatt grumbles, pushing past him off the bus and pulling his ear buds out of his ears.

"I can't be both?"

"*You* can't." Quackity grins. Then he throws a blanket at Wilbur's face. "Take that. I'm ready for the Alaskan winter."

Wilbur folds the blanket over his arm and gets the pleasure of watching Quackity stand in the snow for three whole seconds before he's full body shivering. He's shaking like he's about to shoot off to the moon.

"Okay, I've made a mistake," he says, teeth chattering. "Give me back the blanket."

"No," Wilbur grins, holding it tighter. "I like it. You threw it at me. It's mine now."

"Wilbur -"

"Quackity-"

"Hey." Techno says, slamming his luggage down on the snow, catching their attention. "Come get your stuff."

"Yeah," Schlatt says, breezing by, pack on his back, "last one checked in gets the worst room."

Quackity gasps, jumps up, snatches the blanket from Wilbur's hands, and nearly throws himself into the pit to get his case. "I'm *not* rooming with Schlatt ever again. He snores like a fucking dragon."

"It's called being a *man*, Quackity, fuck you!"

"A man who needs a lung transplant!"

"Is someone gonna wake George and Sapnap?" Phil calls out, hobbling off the bus and stretching his limbs. Wilbur cheekily offers a hand as he gets down and Phil smacks him away. "I'll make you skate laps, Wilbur, don't test me. Just because you're an Olympian doesn't mean I can't still call your mother."

"Don't call my mom, coach," Wilbur pouts. "Look, I'll go wake Sapnap. George though...I mean, he might literally kill me if I wake him."

"Good," Techno murmurs.

"I *heard* that."

Thankfully, Sapnap wakes easily- and loudly, which takes care of George waking up too. Wilbur is still scared of the man. Even with his hoodie up and at least three blankets around his shoulders, he looks like he's ready to take Wilbur down.

"Wilbur." George goes.

"George," Wilbur laughs nervously. "Morning, we're at the village. Schlatt is threatening to take the good rooms. I figured that you didn't want that to happen."

Sapnap sits up abruptly. "Wait, we're here? Like here?" He muscles his way past Wilbur and goes down the aisle. "Come on George, I want to see the other athletes, let's go, let's go!"

George glares at Wilbur, and Wilbur smiles sheepishly. Then he's getting up, collecting his stuff and following Sapnap out without hip checking Wilbur, so Wilbur considers that a huge win. When Wilbur hops back off the bus, Quackity is already glued under Sapnap's arm, leeching his warmth, and Schlatt, for all his big talk, is standing by the door waiting for Phil to lead them all inside.

"Dude, Q, check it- those guys curl." Sapnap says when they get inside out of the cold. Wilbur pulls his beanie off his head and shakes snowflakes out of his hair. "Curling is, like, the world's most confusing sport."

"No, that's Chess." Quackity argues.

"For you, maybe." Techno points out. Quackity makes a face at him. Wilbur snorts.

Then, from behind him, there's the sound of a throat being cleared. Wilbur turns, as does the rest of his team, to see a man standing there, in a long slate gray coat. He's got an earpiece in and a bag on

his back, and he looks utterly unimpressed by the sight of six hockey players all taller and bigger than him.

“Excuse us,” he sneers, his eyes passing over the lot of them like they’re nothing. Wilbur steps back immediately, and that is when he notices the kid standing behind the man. He has a matching coat, neat shoes and his polished figure skates are tied to his bag like trophies. When the two of them walk by, the outside air seems to follow, cold and unforgiving, making Quackity shiver all over again. Even Wilbur, who loves the cold, feels a bit of a chill.

That kid, the way he walked, with his nose high and his piercing blue eyes forward like he didn’t even see them- it unnerves Wilbur. Makes him feel off.

“A figure skater,” Technoblade notes once they’re both out of earshot.

“Ugh,” Sapnap groans. Quackity tries to bury himself further into Sapnap’s jacket. “Prissy bitches.”

“A kid,” Wilbur corrects. “And you don’t even know him. Besides, people think you’re just a big dumb jock when they first see you.”

“And they’re usually right!” Schlatt jokes, punching Sapnap in the arm. Phil sighs and steps between them before they can go at it.

“Let’s go get checked in, alright?” He says. “Get out of the way of the door- just in case.”

Wilbur follows when they go, but his mind is back with the young figure skater with the flat blue eyes and the way his gaze never strayed once as he drifted by.

Techno will admit that he gets a bit on-guard and antsy whenever Wilbur is quiet for too long, but once they’re checked in and settled, he’s back to his normal self, excited and grinning and making a big deal about everything they see.

“It’s the *Olympics*, Techno,” Wilbur says when he brings it up. “Why shouldn’t I be excited?”

And that’s true- Techno can’t argue with that.

The rest of the team is just as excited as well, and that feeling carries over into the morning as they gear up for their first practice in the olympic practice rink. Breakfast is, as usual, a loud and chaotic affair and it’s only made worse by Sapnap, their resident extravert, inviting other players to come and sit with them.

“Guys, guys, this is Ranboo and Tubbo,” Sapnap introduces, ushering them over. “Here, pull that table closer- yeah. These guys snowboard. Isn’t that fucking sick?”

“Sapnap,” Wilbur says. “You snowboard.”

“Yeah, but they’re olympic athletes.”

Again, Wilbur just looks at him.

“Hey,” waves the one with the green trapper hat on. It’s so big that it keeps slipping down and covering his eyes, making him push it up so he can see. “Are you gonna eat those waffles?”

Techno raises an eyebrow. The kid next to him, the taller one, grabs Tubbo’s shoulder and stops him from just taking the food. “Sorry, forgive him. He thinks with his stomach. Hi, I’m Ranboo. I

snowboard. Sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Techno asks. “You’re at the Olympics for it.”

“Yeah, I’m still not quite sure how that happened.” Ranboo laughs sheepishly. “Everything here is so big.”

“And everyone is so old,” Tubbo complains. Somehow, without them knowing about it, Tubbo’s managed to swipe a waffle and is chewing on it happily. Sapnap stifles a laugh. “Well, not everyone, I guess- the kid in our room is our age, I think. He might be younger.”

Wilbur perks up. “Does he ice skate?”

“Yeah, he does. He’s got these sick skates and everything.” Tubbo explains. “He’s quiet though. We tried talking to him, but…”

“But?”

Techno take another look over at Wilbur. He seems a touch *urgent* about knowing more on this kid. It has to be more than just normal curiosity.

Tubbo shrugs. "He's quiet. He doesn't talk much. I guess he's busy."

"Or maybe," Sapnap starts, "he thinks he's better than you."

"What do you have against figure skaters, man?" Ranboo asks. "You hate sequins or something?"

"No, no, I get it," Schlatt huffs. "Figure skating is just ballet on ice. Boring shit, I don't know how people watch it."

"Schlatt's just mad cause he can't dance on regular ground without tripping on his own feet." George snips. "His big dumb brain only knows how to tackle."

Schlatt glares, but doesn't say anything- yet again, George wins. Rank is everything, and the man who wins every fight he picks on the ice, is never truly challenged off of it.

"I don't think he's stuck up," Ranboo says quietly. "A lot of people are quiet. He doesn't *talk*. I don't know, it's weird. But maybe I'm wrong. I guess we'll never know unless he tells us."

Sapnap opens his mouth, probably to say something stupid, but Techno, seeing Wilbur's furrowed brow out the corner of his eye, nudges him to shut up and pushes his plate at him. There's only one waffle, but Sapnap takes it anyway.

Tommy doesn't go to breakfast.

He wakes up before everyone else- no alarm, because his roommates are still asleep and he doesn't want to risk waking them- stretches, grabs his skates and a protein bar and heads down to the rink.

He doesn't talk to his coach, in fact, his coach is probably still sleeping. His coach will probably have a nice warm breakfast and make his way down when he deems necessary. But still, he'll be expecting Tommy to have done his reps. So, he does the same thing that he always does whenever someone expects something of him- he delivers.

Camel to donut to a one handed Y-spin. Over and over and over. After every routine, he pulls himself out into a glide to give himself just a half a second to breath. The wind rushes against his

cheeks, Tommy swallows the coldness down, hoping it will settle his stomach.

He goes and goes and goes until his fingers are numb, and then he puts on his gloves and does ten more. Tommy curves around the rink for just one more go, when he catches sight of a bunch of guys in gear walking in through the door. They're dressed in red and black and have hockey skates and gym bags in their hands.

"Hey!" One of them yells- the one with shaggy black hair tied back by a red headband. "We've this rink scheduled for right now, man. Who do you think you are?"

Tommy tenses, barely resisting the urge to scoot back on the ice. Then another guy, with *pink* hair, reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back.

"Nice skatin' kid."

The compliment makes Tommy's stomach turn. But still, he stands straight, pushing himself off the ice and over to the gate as swiftly as he can. When he gets off, as he always does, his legs shake from overuse and he has to grip the rink edge to keep from pitching forward, but it's nothing that he isn't used to by now.

He fumbles for his bag, but when he hears a scoff and an annoyed mumble from someone in the group, he flinches.

Too slow, he thinks. He's in the way and he's too slow and he's being a nuisance. As always.

He turns, about to rush out, about to *throw up*, when the pink haired man speaks again, reaching a hand out but not touching.

"Hey," he frowns, and he almost seems concerned, "you alright? You seem-"

"Fine." He nods jerkily, and his voice is hoarse from disuse. "I'm- have a good practice."

He leaves then, pushing through them without touching, ignoring the eyes following him. The second that he gets out of the arena, he practically flies to the nearest bathroom, his vision swimming. He tumbles into the first stall and falls to his knees, heaving over the bowl. He's nauseous because he didn't eat, he's nauseous from the interaction, he's nauseous from *being* here.

Everything is so big and bright and much, much, too good for him. He can't do this. Already, he can't do this. He knows it and soon everyone else will too. He's a walking warning sign.

He sits there for a moment, on the cold tile floor, shaking. Everything is cold, and he can't feel his fingers. The only thing he knows for certain is that his chest is buzzing with anxiety and it's only day *two*.

God, he thinks to himself, when does it end?

Tommy gives himself just one more moment of tears and nerves and fear, let's himself feel upset for a moment before he packages it all away. Back down. Deep down. He's here for gold. Nothing else. He needs it.

He likes the feel of the coffee pot. *More than the hacksaw?*

...

"If you board like that for the rest of these games, it'll be just like Australia, Boo," Tubbo remarks, pulling Ranboo's hoodie over his head and yawning.

"Stop bringing up Australia, Tubbo," Ranboo says. His voice is muffled because he's in the room's bathroom and he's brushing his teeth, but Tubbo knows him well enough to hear that note of pleased embarrassment in his tone. "You only bring it up when you want something."

"Well, yeah, I want us to have matching gold medals." Tubbo flops down on his bed. He looks over at Tommy's empty side in consideration. "Friendship necklaces, you know?"

Ranboo mumbles something Tubbo can't parse, but it doesn't matter because their room door is opening and Tommy is coming through. It's almost comical how quickly the silence descends between the two of them. If it was Tubbo, he'd immediately need to know what they were saying, but it isn't, it's Tommy, so he drifts through the room like he's ice.

He's like a glacier, Tubbo observes. Every move is slow and careful and graceful and contained. It's like he's watching himself walk, keeping himself in check. It's fascinating. Tubbo wonders if he's ever been wild in his life. If he's ever been free.

Ranboo pops his head out of the bathroom, toothpaste on his chin. "Hello!"

Tommy full on startles, clearly not expecting the greeting. "Oh. Um, hello," he says back, quiet and nervous. "You've got-" his blue eyes flicker to Tubbo and then back to Ranboo. "There's some-"

Tommy gestures vaguely and Ranboo blinks at him, confused.

"Toothpaste." He finishes. "Sorry. There's just-"

Ranboo turns pink. Swipes a hand across his chin. Then he smiles, all big and goofy like nothing happened. It makes Tubbo snort fondly- his stupid, friendly, lovable best friend. Too nice for his own good, truly.

"It's pretty late- we didn't see you at dinner. Did you go out?" Ranboo asks. Tommy doesn't respond immediately and Ranboo winces a little. "I mean, not that we're keeping tabs on you or anything, we'd never- and you're your own person so if you wanted to stay out, we wouldn't say anything about it-"

"Shut up, Ranboo." Tubbo sighs. Ranboo shuts up.

Tommy's gaze flickers between the two of them again, cautious. "Out? As in, out of the village?" Ranboo nods. "Oh. Oh no. No, it's just that no one uses the rink during meals, so I just- I wanted some extra practice, you know?"

"Ah," Ranboo nods.

There's a quiet pause.

Tommy, if it was even possible, tenses even further. Ranboo begins to shift with nervous energy and Tubbo suddenly has the bizarre realization that he is the most emotionally qualified person in the room to have a normal conversation.

Fuck.

"Hey," he blurts. Tommy meets his eyes, and then his gaze slides to the left. Tubbo doesn't bother chasing it. "You know what? You should come to breakfast with us tomorrow. You can sit with us."

We're not as boring as we look, trust me. We even made friends with these ice hockey players- they're alright, I guess."

Tommy blinks. "What?"

"Yeah, one of them is kind of a pain in the ass, but that's ice hockey for you," Tubbo continues, noting but not lingering on the surprise in Tommy's face. Surprise. Surprise at what? Ice hockey players? The two of them not being boring? What could he be surprised about? "And they've got these really great waffles. I like 'em a lot. Of course, I'm a boarder, and I bet you've never had breakfast with a boarder before. We eat like we're dying. Feasts before we face the mountain."

"Wait," Tommy says. "Wait, you're- oh, you're inviting me to breakfast with you."

Tubbo stops. He looks over at Ranboo. So does Tommy. Ranboo nods, so Tubbo nods.

"Oh," Tommy goes. "Oh."

Ah. All of a sudden a lot is starting to make sense. Tommy was surprised by being *invited*. Jesus.

Tommy seems to process Tubbo's invitation better than Tubbo is processing this new found knowledge of his roommate, because he gives- not really a smile- but something very, very close. A hum of surprised amusement. A yes.

When Tubbo looks at Ranboo again, he's giving a proud little thumbs up.

"Tomorrow then," Tubbo confirms, nodding. "Breakfast."

Tommy nods, then gathers his stuff and slips past Ranboo into the bathroom to change. Glacier in motion.

Tubbo squints. He decides that he wants to see Tommy all thawed out. And Tubbo always gets what he wants.

Sapnap's favorite part about being an ice hockey player- other than the fact that he and his team is good enough for the Olympics, is that he gets to travel all over with them and do the thing that he loves.

He loves the ice, the skates, the stick. He loves waking up in a brand new city, town, state, country. He loves how the air is different and everything is new all the time. Everything feels like a second chance. Everything is shiny and he gets to take his team- his brothers- and discover it.

"No, no, no," Schlatt says, snapping Sapnap out of his thoughts. "No. Look, if anything, we'd go out of here and we'd find some sort of Alaskan party. They must throw down here. It's *Alaska*."

George stares at him. "You are stupid."

"Just because I'm on a team of homebodies, doesn't mean I'm going to become one," he says loudly, and Sapnap rolls his eyes.

"Shut up, Schlatt," Sapnap scoffs, "I take offense to that. Great offense. You know I party."

"You're basically married," Schlatt counters. "Partying with you is different. It's a fucking bummer, man."

Techno, sitting across from him and eating his blueberries, takes a deep, annoyed breath. "I'll send

all of you back where you came from if you don't shut up."

"Yikes," Sapnap blinks. "Someone didn't have their coffee."

"Time zones," He mutters. "Why are they real? You know, time is a made up human concept. Nothing about it makes sense. God isn't real. We're all going to die."

"Here, here," George says, raising his orange juice in a toast. Schlatt looks appalled at the both of them.

Wilbur comes over then, his plate full of eggs and bacon and hashbrowns. He puts a cup of steaming black coffee in front of Techno and sits down.

"Good shit, Soot," Schlatt says, still watching Techno warily. "Captain was getting existential and nihilistic."

Wilbur squints at Techno as he picks up the mug. "Did he start talking about *Art of War*?"

"No, no, we're safe for now."

"Okay, good." Wilbur smiles. "How'd you all sleep? Better be good, cause I want to skate laps today."

"Eat your eggs, you freak," Quackity speaks up, who's been unusually quiet. He's laying flat out on the booth seat on his back, staring up at the ceiling with an arm thrown over his eyes. "I'm already tired of this. It's always so cold and then we have to go onto the *ice*?"

"When you became an *ice* hockey player," George leads and trails off expectantly. The silence is very judgemental.

"I like hitting stuff with a stick, fuck off."

"Okay, but you're rooming with Sapnap, human space heater," Wilbur points out. "Be grateful."

"Wil *bur*." Quackity groans tiredly.

"Quack *ity*." Wilbur mocks.

Sapnap ignores them, spotting the two snowboarders standing by the entrance to the dining hall, looking around like they're confused. They're standing together, heads close, whispering between themselves, clearly waiting for something.

"Hey!" Sapnap says loudly. A lot of heads turn to him and Techno groans, but he doesn't care. "Hey Ranboo! Tubster! Come sit by us!"

Ranboo goes bright red, but Tubbo- and Sapnap knew he liked that kid- grabs Ranboo by the wrist and pulls him over.

"What were you two doing just standing over there as if you don't know us?" Sapnap asks, raising an eyebrow when Ranboo cranes his neck to look over to where they came from.

"We were waiting for someone," Tubbo sighs, sitting down. He sees Quackity. "Is that guy dead?"

"No," Quackity answers. "Wish I was."

"Understandable," Tubbo nods. "Carry on." He, to Sapnap's intense delight, reaches over and picks

some blueberries off of Techno's plate. No qualms at all about Techno's huge broad shoulders or general terrifying appearance. And, of course, Technoblade just sighs. "Thanks, nice berries."

"We were waiting for our roommate." Ranboo explains, his look to Tubbo is disapproving. "Tommy."

"The figure skater?" Schlatt asks. "We saw him on the ice the other day. He was spinning and shit. He looked like a top or something- watchin' made me want to throw up. I'll never get that sport."

"He was good," Wilbur says pointedly.

"He was rude," Sapnap corrects. "Techno complimented him and he didn't even say anything."

"Well, to be fair," Techno finally speaks up, "he looked just about to throw up as well. So I'll forgive him for that."

"Wait," Ranboo frowns. "Don't you guys practice in the afternoon?"

"Yup," Sapnap nods proudly. "Twelve to three is our slot."

But Ranboo doesn't smile. "He came in last night after ten- said he just got off the ice."

Wilbur's eye twitches.

"Yeah, but last night he said he'd come to breakfast with us, and when we woke up, he was gone. We already checked the ice rinks and stuff, but he wasn't there either."

"You're trying to make friends with this kid?" Sapnap asks, incredulously. He doesn't get why they're wasting their time. "He clearly has better things to do."

"You didn't see him last night," Tubbo says suddenly. "He was- he looked- I don't fucking know. But it wasn't good."

Across from him, Wilbur pales.

"Does anyone want to know what I think?" Quackity asks loudly.

"No." Schlatt says.

"Too bad. I'm gonna tell you," Quackity sits up, readjusts his beanie. "I think that he isn't stuck-up. He's probably just here to compete, you know? He's young and at the Olympics. Maybe he's nervous."

"No, no," Sapnap scoffs. "Kids don't just *not* have fun. He's in a whole new place and he doesn't explore anything but the rink? Sounds fake."

"Maybe he's good." George shrugs. "We saw him yesterday. Maybe he just wants to be the best."

"The best," Schlatt grumbles. "He spins around on the ice in a costume. How is that hard?"

"Shut up, Schlatt." George says. "Eat your omelet."

Schlatt shuts up and eats his omelet.

"Why doesn't someone just go find out if he's stuck up or not?" Wilbur blurts. "I mean, if Ranboo and Tubbo over here are saying he isn't-"

"-which is *true*," Tubbo says.

"-then all it should take is a simple conversation with him to see."

Schlatt, over a mouthful of egg and tomato, goes, "Sounds like you've just volunteered, Soot. Better make haste. I'm putting money down on this- I just decided. I bet the kid is a prissy little twerp."

"You're betting?"

Schlatt pulls out a piece of crumpled paper and smooths it out on the table. Techno side eyes it. He clearly disapproves, but all he does is sip his coffee- Sapnap can practically *hear* him think *It's too early for this*.

"Who says he's stuck up?" He asks, looking around the table. Sapnap raises his hand- he's alone in this one. "Alright, me and Sap. What says you Quackity? George?"

"I like money," George shrugs. "I think he's just here to win."

"Same!" Quackity chirps.

"Keep me out of this," Techno sighs. "I'm basically broke."

"You're a professional world renowned athlete." Sapnap points out. Techno just shrugs.

"Still broke."

"And the little boarders over here can't join," Schlatt says. "They're biased."

"We're *right*," Tubbo says firmly.

"Uh huh, tomatoes and potatoes," then Schlatt turns to Wilbur, who looks ticked off. "Soot? You joining in or are you also a broke bitch?"

Wilbur purses his lips and then scoffs. "Fine. Whatever, put me down for ten that the kid is just a kid. For the record- I was forced into this. You all suck- except you two. Tubbo, Ranboo, you're lovely."

Ranboo beams.

"Go on then, Wilbur," Sapnap shoos. "Go find the figure skater and see what's wrong with him."

Wilbur sticks his tongue out at Sapnap and then goes.

Wilbur looks everywhere he can think off- outside, the rinks, the common rooms, the medical center. There's no sign of him.

The longer that he has to look the more he feels as if he's been sent on a wild goose chase for no good reason. Like, what? He's gonna go and find this kid and their lives will change all of a sudden? Wilbur doesn't *think* so.

This guy is probably just a guy, and Wilbur coming to talk to him about nothing will probably just freak him out. But whatever, anything to prove Schlatt and Sapnap wrong.

(And to get rid of the nagging gut feeling that he has, and *has* had about the figure skater from the first time Wilbur saw him. He just- he needs to be proven wrong. He doesn't want to be right about

this.)

On a whim, he decides to check the studios, where they've got recreational things like gyms and pools and game rooms. He's not in the pool and not in the weight room. Wilbur's about to just give up when he realizes there's a studio at the very end of the hall.

Just as Wilbur is walking up, a man, the coach from the first day, is coming out. He's on the phone, talking gruffly, sounding annoyed, in a tone that makes Wilbur slip by him- move out of his way so he isn't faced with any of that anger.

"-no," he's saying. "No, the kid needs to learn. Yeah, that's what I'm trying to fucking tell him. This isn't his small iced over pond anymore. If he falls the fuck in, he's drowning. No one is coming to save his ass-"

Wilbur pauses when the man is past him. He stops and turns and watches him go. Already, without any words spoken to the man, Wilbur knows how he is. Wilbur knows his type. Coaches that curl a fist around their player and squeeze.

Wilbur doesn't want to be anywhere *near* him.

He shakes himself and turns around to head inside the studio, but he has to stop. It's a normal dance studio, with a bar and a neat wooden floor and a wall made of mirrors. Everything is clean and precise and new in there, and in the middle of it, on the floor with his knees up to his chest, and his hands pressed to his face is the kid.

He's quiet, but Wilbur can tell he's crying. His shoulders are trembling.

That's enough for Wilbur to know that he's more than just a stuck up piece of work. He *should* silently sink back and head back down the hall, leave him here to whatever is making him ache, but Wilbur can't. He *can't*.

(That nagging gut feeling is more than just that now- it's a reality. He can't just let this be. Not him. How could he?)

"Hey," Wilbur says softly.

Tommy startles. Looks up. His cheeks are tear stained roses and his eyes are the brightest blue Wilbur's ever seen. "...hi." He wipes his cheeks quickly, fumbling to look presentable. "Sorry, I'm just-"

His voice dies. There's nothing to say.

Wilbur gets it.

"What's this room?" Wilbur asks, stepping in a bit, looking around. He pretends he doesn't see Tommy collecting himself as he walks around. "I'm trying to get myself situated in here, but it's like a maze. Everything leads to somewhere else."

"Um, yeah." Tommy says quietly. He rises to his feet gracefully. Wilbur's got to give him credit, when he looks over, he can't even tell that the boy had just been crying.

That is, if Wilbur hadn't walked in on it happening right in front of his eyes.

"It's a dance studio," he finishes. He avoids looking in the mirror. Wilbur frowns.

"Oh, so you're a figure skater then." He says. Tommy nods minutely. "I don't think any snowboarders would dance as practice."

Tommy winces slightly at the mention of snowboarders and Wilbur can see him tensing up, he can practically sense the shut down coming, so he just blurts the first thing he can think of.

"How is it?" Tommy blinks, confused. "Being a figure skater?" Wilbur clarifies. "I mean, I play ice hockey, so I know all about skating and playing a sport, but figure skating is a mystery to me. I mean, all the jumps look the same, so I have no idea how the judges can even score them."

"Well," Tommy starts, pulling his hands up into his sleeves like a turtle. "It's a little difficult to explain, but the best way that I can put it is that figure skating is like knitting. Every stitch is different and when you perform a routine, you're showing off your scarf. You want to make it seem as flawless as possible. Not like you're doing a bunch of different movements, but that it's all one motion. From the flourish of your fingers to the point of your toe. Everything matters."

It's the most Wilbur's heard him speak at once and it's the most relaxed and open he's been. But still Wilbur notices how he doesn't seem *happy* when he explains it. He talks about it in a technical way, like there's no emotion involved. Like he's heard someone else say this and is just reciting what he's heard time and time before. It's beautiful, but the blankness in his expression is almost horrifying. Wilbur finds himself unnerved yet again. No one this young should talk about the sport they play with such a distance.

"I've been trying to get this one part- this one stitch," he continues, a bit frustrated now, "but I can't. It's not good enough."

Not good enough, Wilbur thinks, or not perfect?

"Show me," he says instead and Tommy frowns.

"Show you? What do you mean?"

"Show me. Show me the move you're trying to do."

"But I'm a-" Tommy stops himself, disregarding whatever he was going to say with a frustrated purse of the lips. "Why?"

"I'm curious." Wilbur shrugs. *About you. About this sadness you've got pulling on you. About how it seems to wrap around you like a fog.* "And I like skating too. Not figure, obviously, but- you know. I'm always looking for more training."

"You want me to ...teach you?" He asks hesitantly.

"Why not? Isn't that the mark of a master? A person who can teach knows the material front and back. It'll help you learn it too, yeah?"

Tommy looks off to the side, considering. He looks troubled, trying to justify it in his head. Trying to justify having a bit of fun. The cost opportunity of not practicing. "It...would. Yes."

"Cool!" Wilbur exclaims, quick to speak up before Tommy manages to change his own mind.

"Meet me on the rink tonight after dinner. We might have to sneak in, but you know, that's easy."

"What if we get in trouble?" Tommy asks, and it's adorable how his voice hushes and his eyes widen like he's never broken the rules ever in his life.

"We won't get in trouble if we don't get caught." Wilbur smirks. Tommy looks absolutely horrified.

He wants to be tender and merciful. That sounds overly valorous. Sounds like penance. And his hands?

...

"The rink is your oyster," Sapnap says, sweeping around the outside, stick in hand, an annoying cocky grin on his face. "Come at me, George."

George is going to tackle him into the stands.

"Don't kill Sapnap," Quackity warns. He's still putting his skates on- trying to tie the laces. They're not technically practicing. They're just bored for now, and decided to come out here while Schlatt and Techno were off in the actual gym and Wilbur was who knows where.

But *just screwing around* doesn't mean George can't take Sapnap down right where he stands.

"I'm gonna kill him," George says. "I really, really, am."

Sapnap sticks his tongue out at George, and that's the last straw. He's about to fly down the ice and beat him like he's a pad, but the rink door opens.

"I thought you'd all be here," Wilbur says, running up, a bit out of breath. "We running a scrimmage or what?"

"Where have you been?" Sapnap asks, and George guesses he can't slide tackle the man now- not when he's looking the complete wrong direction. How annoying. "You never texted if you were coming back or not."

"I found out about the kid." He says. Quackity reaches up a hand and Wilbur pulls him to his feet, steadying him on instinct. "He's not stuck up."

Sapnap's face drops. "Oh no."

"Oh yes," Quackity grins. "Money is coming my way and it's gonna feel so damn good when it gets here."

"How do you know?" George asks, because as much as he loves money, he loves things proven beyond reasonable doubt even more. Getting paid is always best when it's completely honest.

"He's gonna teach me some figure skating," Wilbur shrugs, but even he can't keep his little grin down. "I'm gonna dance on the ice."

"How did we get from A to B so quickly?" Sapnap asks. "I mean, you had one conversation with him. One. Now he's teaching you a whole new sport?"

Wilbur sobers a little, his eyes dropping over to the marks in the ice. "Well," he starts slowly, "he's not- I think that he's a bit-"

"Take your time, Wil." Quackity says and Sapnap nods firmly in agreement. George resists the urge to smile. As much as they go at each other...

"His coach." Wilbur says finally. "That guy we saw when we first got here? Do you guys

remember him?"

"The one who told us to get the fuck out the way or else he'd stomp on us with his little skates?" Sappap huffs. "Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I ran into him. I mean, not really, because he was leaving, but- I don't know. When I got into the room, the kid was...crying."

"Bad coach," Quackity says softly, and George can't help it, his fingers clench tight on the side of the rink. Only one thing truly enrages George. Bullies. Coaches or kids or Olympic athletes like him. It doesn't matter. They all suck.

"I didn't hear anything he said to Tommy, but-" Wilbur sighs, tugging a hand through his hair. Quackity tsks, then reaches down into his bag and gives him a hat. "Thanks. It doesn't seem good. None of it."

The doors open again, and this time, their coach is coming through them. "Okay, good." Phil says. "I saw Schlatt and Tech in the gym, but I figured you guys would be here instead."

"That's what Wil said," Sappap remarks.

"Are you guys scrimmaging?"

"That is *also* what Wil said."

"We might," George answers, because he hopes so- he's itching to get out on the ice with a puck, not just to beat Sappap up. "We're talking about the figure skater kid now."

"The one from when we got here? What happened?" Phil frowns.

Wilbur explains- more in detail this time- about what he saw and what Tommy said. To George, it sounds like this coach needs a good strong knock up against the head. Words work, but sometimes you just need to hit something- make it fear you. It's what he thought about Wilbur's old coach, and he feels the same way now.

When Wilbur is finished, Phil sighs.

"It's a sad thing," He says, "a controlling coach. For some, that coaching style works but more often than not, no. And if it doesn't, I can imagine the effect it would have. It would do a lot to someone that isn't equipped to handle it."

"He's young too," Wilbur says. "He's a *child*, Phil."

"And figure skating is a solo sport. He doesn't have a team to fall back on when he makes a mistake. Everything is on him. He's got no one to shoulder the burden with him- give him his due praise."

There's a quiet, solemn pause.

"What can we do?" Wilbur asks, eyes wide. And the question, it isn't *can we do something*, it's *what can we do*, like there isn't a doubt in Wilbur's mind that they would do something to help.

"Here's what I can do-" Phil offers. "I can look out for the coach. Keep an eye on him. I can't make any promises, not at this level, but if I see something shifty, I'll say something."

Wilbur's head dips in relief. "That's all I ask. Thanks Phil. I can handle everything else."

"Hey," Sappap speaks up, taps his stick against the ice twice. "We. We can handle everything else. Team, yeah? You're not alone, Wilbur."

Wilbur flushes and Phil smiles proudly. George, again, hides his own grin. He loves his team. He loves his team more than anything.

Turn, pull the left leg back, drag, strike the ice, jump- arms in for four full rotations, land, arms out, leg out. Grace, balance, poise.

Don't show them that you're out of breath. No one wants to see that.

Tommy slides backward down the rink, gaining back his balance and straightening out.

"Hey!" The door slams, Wilbur comes running up, loud and clumsy. If Tommy was anyone else he would've been startled. Luckily, he's used to yelling and loud slams as he practices. His coach makes sure of that. "You're already here!"

Tommy stops gliding backward and turns abruptly, cutting the ice and stopping. "Yeah. I hope that's okay. I figured that you don't have to sneak in if you're here past closing so-

"Jeez, I didn't think of that." Wilbur laughs, and Wilbur, Tommy's noticed, has a habit of that. Laughing. Making normal things funny. Keeping things casual. Tommy admires that. He throws his bag down outside the rink, stretches his arms out. "Guess committing crimes was a bit unnecessary. Ugh, how long have you been out here practicing, man? I didn't see you at dinner."

Tommy doesn't answer. "I ate. Are those hockey skates?"

Wilbur pauses, his eyes down on his bag. There's a moment, in which Wilbur looks like he's struggling to think of something to say, or whether or not he should say anything at all, but it passes, as all moments do. "Yeah," he nods instead, a bit quieter now. "Yeah, they're my practice ones. I hope that's cool, I don't really have figure skates so-

"That's alright."

"Cool," Wilbur finishes lacing them up and then reaches up a hand expectantly.

And for a second Tommy just stares at it.

He can't remember the last time he held someone's hand. Touched fingers that weren't correcting his form or pushing him into his proper place. But here is Wilbur. Here is this open hand. He's expecting Tommy to give him some help- of course he is, as someone who has always had teammates around to lift him up. Of course he knows how to ask for help.

Tommy always has to get up on his own.

He reaches down and meets Wilbur in the middle, pulling the man to his feet. He doesn't let himself linger, but he can't help noticing- Wilbur's hands are warm. Much, much warmer than Tommy's.

Wilbur can clearly feel that, because when he lets go and hobbles over to the gate, he's frowning. "You ought to get some gloves, Tommy. Especially if you're gonna be out on the rink for hours and hours."

Tommy curls his cold fingers into a ball. A bit ashamed of himself. He doesn't really know why.

"I'll think about it," he says quietly. He has them- he just doesn't use them unless he can't stand it. Practicing through the cold is good for him, or so he's been told. It makes you focus on your form. The cold bites, but all the best figure skaters are numb. Tommy's got to be the best. And to be the best, Tommy's got to be numb.

Wilbur is pretty smooth on the ice, which makes sense, his whole sport happens on it, Tommy would be more concerned if he *couldn't* skate and made it to the Olympics.

"A lot of the moves are hard to do with your type of skate," Tommy says, curving around Wilbur, trying to think. "The toe pick is pretty important to make sure you can do things like hop across the rink and jump and stuff."

"Jump?"

"Yeah, all the- uh- technical stuff." Tommy nods. *The important stuff.* "That's what you get points for."

"Oh," Wilbur tilts his head, rolls his shoulders. "Well, I don't need to know any of that. I want to do the fun stuff."

"The...fun stuff?" He repeats, truly confused.

"Yeah, what do you consider to be the most fun part of skating, Tommy?"

Tommy curves another circle around Wilbur, trying to think. What does he have the most fun doing as he skates? *Jumps*, is his first thought, but that isn't true, is it? He likes landing a jump. He likes the points that he gets. Because those matter. He never feels like he's having fun when he's doing Quad toe loops. He doesn't even like the spins as much.

He realizes he's skated another circle around Wilbur and not given him his answer.

"I don't know," Tommy admits. He feels sick. He should have an answer. "The- I like- um-"

"Hey," Wilbur says softly, stopping Tommy in the middle of his next revolution. "I get it. If you don't know, that's cool. That's alright."

Tommy looks down at the ice under his feet. "Sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," He reassures. "Teach me something basic then. The easiest thing you can."

So Tommy does- he shows him bunny hops and forward swizzles and then a rocking horse. Easy level things that Wilbur can try. He bumps around, way too broad shouldered and not at all delicate in the way that figure skating is supposed to be. His coach would hate this. His coach would run Wilbur off the ice.

But Tommy isn't his coach.

When Wilbur's legs shake and he nearly throws off his own balance trying to overcompensate, Tommy doesn't reprimand him, doesn't nudge him with a finger, and make him learn his lesson the hard way.

"How was that?" Wilbur asks, a huge, proud smile on his face. His cheeks are red and his eyes are sparkling in delight.

Sloppy, he thinks in a voice that isn't his own. *Careless. Shaky.*

His coach would have a million things to say, none of them good. Tommy doesn't say any of that.

"Good job," Tommy says, which is the only thing his coach wouldn't.

Wilbur just grins breathlessly in response.

Techno raises an eyebrow when his door's lock unlatches, and Wilbur pokes his head in like he could ever sneak inside without alerting him.

"Wilbur," he greets calmly, just to save them both the trouble, turning another page in the book he's been reading. Wilbur nearly jumps a foot in the air.

"Je *sus*, Techno, what the fuck?"

Techno rolls his eyes. "You're literally coming in at eleven and you're expecting me to be asleep? Come on Wilbur, you know me better than that."

Wilbur sighs, kicks his door closed and drops his gym bag down tiredly. "Yeah, I do. That was stupid, I guess."

Technoblade squints at the despondent note in his voice. He doesn't like hearing that. Not at all. He debates himself internally for a moment before he closes his book and sets it aside.

"What's going on, Wil?" He asks, swinging his legs off the bed and leaning forward. Taking a good look at Wilbur, who's unlacing his sneakers and kicking them off tiredly. "Something's been on your mind lately."

"And I've got to tell you what it is?" He asks, glaring a bit. Techno doesn't take the bait.

"I'm offering my ear, Wilbur. You know I'd never not hear you out." Patience and care. And of course, upon hearing that, Wilbur melts.

He stops, looking down at his socks, damp from the cold and sweat, and for a moment he looks so *tired*, that Techno worries it's a problem that's much bigger than he realized. He worries that it's a problem he can't fix with one conversation. Something that's been building and building since before they got on the plane and the bus and came here.

"I just finished getting off the ice," Wilbur admits quietly. "I was there with Tommy, learning some figure skating."

Hearing that makes Techno sigh, both relief and exasperation falling from his lips. "Wil, please don't adopt a stray at the Olympics. I mean, don't you remember what happened in Sochi?"

"This is nothing like that," Wilbur protests. Techno continues looking unimpressed. "I promise! This is different. Really. I mean, even Phil said that he'd look out for the kid."

That makes Techno stop. He trusts Phil's judgment more than anything. The last time he'd *watched out* for a kid... "Look out?" He asks. "What's going on? What's wrong with him?"

Wilbur's head hangs low, his bangs covering his eyes. Techno can't see his expression, but he can hear the way his voice rings with an ache. "What isn't? Just two conversations and I could see almost everything, Tech- bad coach, solo sport, no team. He's got zero support system. Zero." Wilbur pauses, looking for words, and he must find them because he looks up, urgent to make

Techno understand. "Have you ever seen a kid at the Olympics not smile? I haven't, but don't think he's smiled once."

"He's focused," Techno tries, but it sounds uncertain even to his ears. Wilbur glares half heartedly.

"Come on, Tech. You know better than that." He pauses again, swallowing, and as always, Techno waits patiently for him to get his thoughts in order. When he does speak, it's quiet. "He reminds me of me way back when, man, before you and Phil got me out, and I don't-"

He stops again, his throat working and Techno takes a deep breath.

He remembers Wilbur way back when- what feels like a million years ago, another ice rink, another competition. They weren't on the same team, which now feels like a grave offense. But Wilbur was under different management, and whatever that was made him walk around with his eyes low and made him second guess his words and made him throw himself into fights out on the ice. Techno remembers thinking *something is rotten about that team, that kid is drowning*, and telling Phil to keep an eye out. And of course, over the course of the week, Wilbur grew closer and closer with them, until eventually, it all spilled out- the verbal abuse, the never-ending practices, the way he was made to feel like fighting was the only entertainment he'd ever be able to provide on a hockey rink.

Of course, not true, as evidenced by the fact that he's an Olympic level ice hockey player now and he hasn't gotten into an ice fight in *years*, but being told that over and over and over by someone who gives you instruction... it really twisted up something inside of Wilbur. Even today, he still shoulders guilt like it's his job. He still thinks and thinks and thinks about things that should be simple, but have been made to feel like tests.

So if this is Wilbur- his Wilbur- taking notice and insisting that something is urgent? If this is Wilbur coming to Techno with a problem and trusting that he'll have his back? Techno is going to support him. Of course he is.

"I hear you," he says soothingly, relieving Wilbur. "I hear you, Wil. I believe you. He needs some help. Alright, so what's the play? This is all your call."

Wilbur blinks, then smiles slowly- that great big grin of relief stretching across his cheeks. He's still surprised at being listened to, even now. It makes Techno burn distantly. "He's teaching me figure skating moves," He laughs. "It's actually kind of insane."

"He's teaching you figure skating? On...hockey skates." Techno says slowly. "You know that's a lost cause, right?"

Wilbur's smile dims a bit. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. I think he knows it too. I think...God, I think he's lonely, Tech. I think he just needs some company. Badly."

Techno doesn't even know the kid and already his stomach is in knots at the thought. He hums, taking a breath. "Alright. Well. Let's give him some company then, Wil. You're on."

When Tommy is finished with his morning stretches and forms and has cycled through all the dry land practices of his routines in the studio, he heads to the cafeteria. It's later than he thought it would be, so he isn't expecting anyone to still be there- he's alright sitting alone if he must, it wouldn't phase him.

(At least, that's what he tells himself.)

Surprisingly, there are still people in there, and the sound of them all talking makes Tommy nervous until he catches sight of Ranboo waving him over. He looks excited to see Tommy, all delighted, like he's been waiting. Which, that's ridiculous, he wouldn't, but maybe.

Ranboo isn't sitting alone either, he's with the pink-haired hockey player from the other day and Wilbur. Seeing Wilbur makes Tommy relax slightly, and before he knows it, he's making his way over.

"Tommy!" Ranboo exclaims. "Hi, I didn't think you were coming."

"Hello," he says softly, sitting by his roommate's side. Wilbur leans over and smiles at him- he looks silly.

"Tommy the ice skater," He greets. "Meet my team captain, Technoblade. He's much nicer than he looks."

"You calling me ugly, Wil?" Technoblade asks, and then addresses Tommy with a gentle look. "Hi, I'm Technoblade, but you can call me Techno."

"Hi." Tommy offers, and then clams up because he doesn't know what else to say. It's been a while since he's had a meal with anyone other than his coach- is he expected to make small talk? When does he eat? How do people talk and eat at the same time and not make a fool of themselves? What if they're watching him to see if they like having him around and he ruins it by being too distant?

Luckily, Wilbur starts talking before Tommy has to. "We've got lots of other teammates, as I'm sure you know, cause you saw us, but- they're a zoo."

"You all are annoying." Techno says. "I have to watch and make sure you guys don't fall on your faces or get yourselves into a mess you have no business handling."

"We'd never do that," Wilbur rolls his eyes. He leans over to Ranboo and Tommy. "Don't listen to him guys, we're perfect and he's the devil."

Ranboo laughs and Techno rolls his eyes, but the look is soft. It makes Tommy relax a little, them all being so easy-going. He doesn't offer much to the conversation, but that's alright because they seem content to just talk around him. They seem to think just his quiet company is good enough. And Tommy can do that- Tommy can be quiet. It's nice sitting there and listening to them, feeling included even if he shouldn't be. His coach would hate to see him taking time to socialize with other athletes- thankfully, since none of them figure skate, and therefore aren't his opponents, the most that will happen is that he's told off.

"Here," Ranboo whispers. Tommy looks down at his hand. He's offering a powerbar, strawberry flavored. "They're my favorite to eat when I'm too nervous to have a meal. You should try it- if you want."

Slowly, Tommy takes it, watching Ranboo carefully, but his expression doesn't change nor does he rip it back. He just smiles encouragingly, so Tommy opens it and takes a bite, letting the sweet yogurt melt on his tongue. It *is* good. Tommy thinks he likes it. As he eats it, he realizes that it's the first time that he's had an appetite since he got here. His stomach's settled down slightly since last night, and Ranboo's smile and the conversation going around him makes him feel- warm, almost.

It's nice, he realizes. Who knew having company would be so nice? He even thinks he likes it- not

being alone anymore. He thinks he could like it a lot.

His hands keep turning into birds and flying away from him. *Him being you.* Yes.

...

They head down to the rink again, just the two of them. Wilbur does his best to ignore the way Tommy messages his coach, telling him that he's going to go practice.

It's like he owes him every bit of his time, like he's logging his hours on the rink. It makes Wilbur upset to see. He remembers doing that, and he remembers feeling guilty for every hour he spent off the ice. Anything he did that wasn't working for a victory was a waste.

Wilbur would hate for Tommy to feel like that.

Luckily, Tommy seems to feel much more comfortable around Wilbur this time around- he's able to reach forward and lightly correct his form and not look afraid about it. He looks Wilbur in the eyes and speaks just a little louder. When Wilbur asks him to show a move again, he does it and Wilbur can see his hands- the way that they stay steady. That simple fact makes Wilbur want to cheer. He wants Tommy to be relaxed on the ice, he wants Tommy to take a deep breath.

He deserves just as much.

"What about those cool glides that you guys do? They look all swoopy when I see them on TV." Wilbur skates backwards, keeping his eyes on Tommy's confused frown.

"What do you mean?"

Wilbur sticks his hands out at his sides. "When you put your arms out and go flying across the ice. It looks so fucking fast. Grace, which I know I don't have, but speed? I've got speed for days."

Tommy looks unsure. "I don't think that will help with hockey. Isn't footwork the most important thing? And besides, I don't practice those, they're-

"They're what?" Wilbur blurts. "Fun? Are you not allowed to have fun?"

Out on the ice, Tommy can't hide the way his hands shake, no matter how much he might wish he could. And Wilbur is watching them, gauging how he's doing- when they curl up, he knows he pushed just a little too much. Tommy shrugs like he isn't affected. Wilbur purses his lips, upset. He wants to say something, badly. He wants to say, *can't you see? Can't you see how wrong that is? Can't you see that you deserve the things that are being kept from you?*

But he knows better than anyone that he has to be patient. He doesn't want to scare Tommy off.

He swallows, working to stay light. "Well, that's- that's stupid. Come on, Tommy. Come on, please? Teach me a figure skating swoop. I wanna fly."

Something about that must be important to him, because Tommy inhales sharply. Then he exhales slowly, collecting himself, and nodding. "Okay. Let's try it."

Tommy leads him over to the wall, because, as he says most figure skating moves are done on one leg, and for a hockey player, that's a lot to get used to. And right he is- Wilbur thought it would be just as easy as Tommy makes it look, but no. He feels like he's going to fall every second he's standing.

"Think about balance," Tommy offers quietly. "If you're leaning one way, you want to compensate for it." Tommy touches Wilbur's chest lightly. "Lift your head up. Your chin. Imagine you've caught sight of something ahead, and if you look away, it'll be gone."

Tommy shows him a couple of times, going around and around the rink, flawless every single rotation. He talks as he skates, explaining how the balance is measured, explaining where it all comes from and how it escapes.

"You've got to think about yourself as one part, not a bunch of different sections." He says, curving forward before spinning on his heel and going the other way. "If you try to move one limb at a time then you'll be jerky and that will throw you off."

"One motion," Wilbur repeats, letting go of the wall. He thinks he's got it.

Tommy hums, then pulls to a stop. "More than that, and people don't say this often anymore, but the best skaters perform, yeah? They feel. They let their moves be fueled by their emotions. Just like dance. Skill is just as important as art."

Wilbur hesitates, then, following his instinct, asks, "do you believe that?"

Tommy looks caught for a moment. "I- I mean- it doesn't really matter what I believe, does it?"

Wilbur wants to say *yes, it does. How could it not?* He doesn't. "Is it true, then?"

"At the Olympics? No." He says instantly. "Points win medals. Art is always second, if it's there at all."

It's very- robotic. Very rehearsed. Dead, almost. Wilbur wonders if there's anyone in there. How deep down is the real Tommy, and how long has he been in hiding?

"Luckily, I've got plenty of emotion to spare." Wilbur jokes, pushing off the wall. "Skill on the other hand..."

"You'll do great," Tommy says softly, following Wilbur at a distance. He sounds shy just saying it. Hesitant. "Just- take your time. Don't be afraid to break it into steps if you need to."

Tommy, Wilbur thinks, *would be a fantastic figure skating coach.*

"I've got this," Wilbur says, much more confident than he feels and certainly much more cocky. "I've got this. I'm a pro."

Tommy doesn't comment on that, but Wilbur imagines if he did, he'd be quite skeptical. The Tommy in his head is actually very sassy.

"Go on," is what Tommy actually says, and Wilbur feels a light two-finger touch at his back, and then he's going. He keeps everything Tommy said in his head like a list- build his speed, lean forward, eyes up and forward, leg back, balance, then arms, and it should be-

Wilbur laughs, a giddy sort of pride bubbling in his gut when he realizes he's *doing it*. "Tommy! Tommy, do you see? Are you seeing this? I'm swooping!"

Tommy follows, watching closely. For a brief, *brief* second, his expression flickers, and Wilbur thinks he sees a smile, and that's when he completely forgets everything he's doing.

"Wait, Wilbur, your leg needs to be-"

But it's too late, Wilbur raises his leg without straightening up and all of a sudden he's toppling forward, about to hit his face on the ice. Luckily, he's got good reflexes, and catches himself, swinging his other skate down and waving his arms like mad, but the laws of physics hate him because he still hits the ice anyway. Goes spinning across it like Bambi.

Tommy skids over, stopping so suddenly that ice sprays to Wilbur's left. His eyes are wide and worried, as if Wilbur wasn't an Olympic hockey player who used to get into *fights* with other players because it was part of the game.

"Wilbur? Are you okay?"

Wilbur sighs. "My ass's heart is broken. *And* bruised."

Tommy stares at him for a beat, processing, and then he smiles. But more than that, he *laughs*. It's loud. A good loud. The kind of loud that makes Wilbur stop and look and want to laugh too, even if the joke was subpar. Tommy's laughter makes his own cheeks color and makes him slide back on the ice, curling his arms around his middle.

He's laughing at Wilbur, but Wilbur couldn't care less- the sound of Tommy's joy is *magnificent*. All he can do is stare in awe.

There you are Tommy , he thinks. *It's nice to finally meet you.*

Sapnap tries to pick some fries off of Techno's plate but the man smacks at his hand, making him pull back with a pout.

"You let Tubbo do it!" He whines, rubbing his hand.

Techno looks at him, unimpressed. "Tubbo can take things without being obvious. I respect him."

"And not me?"

Techno doesn't even answer. Quackity opens a palm, leaning over like a little shit. "Tech, can I have a fry please?"

"I'm not your mother," He says, but slides his plate over to Quackity easily. Quackity grins and Sapnap's jaw drops. He's about to be upset, loudly and annoyingly, when Wilbur walks up, cheeks flushed like he just came from the ice.

"Wilbur!" Sapnap exclaims. "Tell Techno that I deserve everything that I want always and forever."

"Ah, so you're in one of your annoying moods, huh?" Wilbur says, amused. "Glad I could be here for this- wouldn't want to miss it for the world."

"How was your practice?" Techno asks, and Sapnap suddenly notices that Wilbur isn't alone. Behind him, just a little winter shadow, is Tommy. His cheeks similarly flushed and his hair messy like the wind has been blowing through it. His face is blank, but if Sapnap didn't know better, he'd think that there was a slight ring of nervousness in his blue eyes.

"Practice?" Schlatt asks.

"Yeah, Tommy's been teaching me a bit of figure skating. Well, trying to- sit here Toms, yeah, there you go- no, I was doing great today, wasn't I?" Tommy nods nervously, even Sapnap can see

the way he holds himself. Like he's expecting...Sapnap doesn't know. An attack? Wilbur grins like everything is normal. "See? Except, well, I mean, I took a spill."

George raises an eyebrow. "So you suck then."

"No," Wilbur pouts. "I just fell once. One time. Tommy thought it was funny. He laughed."

And something about the way he says it holds significance. It means something, something specific. It clearly means the same to Techno too, who's eyes widen. Sapnap feels left in the dark.

"That's good," Techno says, his voice soft. Directed straight at Tommy, who ducks his gaze and turns pink. "That's great."

"Yeah," Quackity snorts. "Make him fall more. He deserves it for being so annoying."

"I have never been annoying in my whole life," Wilbur argues, and Quackity laughs for real, leaning in, probably ready to detail every single time in Wilbur's life that he's annoyed Quackity, and Sapnap would gladly join in, just to ruffle Wilbur's feathers, but he can't.

He just can't stop watching Tommy.

Something about the kid is... *wrong*. Something about him makes Sapnap uneasy all of a sudden. He didn't feel it before, back when he first saw the kid walking by, nose high, taller than anything, but now he seems to be the complete opposite of that. Now, he shrinks, curling into himself, trying to hide from some unseen threat. It makes Sapnap antsy- makes him want to drag his eyes across the room, find whatever is creeping Tommy out and kick its ass so he can relax.

Sapnap gets the vague feeling that he can't fight this particular battle for the kid.

It's in his silence- one that he doesn't even *try* to break. Like being quiet is how he lives. It makes Sapnap think of Wilbur, way back when. It makes Sapnap feel just this side of ill.

"You want something to drink, Tommy?" Sapnap blurts, cutting off Wilbur and Quackity's playful argument and drawing all the attention to himself.

Tommy's eyes widen. All the attention shifts to him, waiting for his answer. His cheeks color. "No," he says rapidly. "No, I'm- thank you. Thank you, I'm alright-"

Wilbur frowns a bit, completely forgetting his argument. "Are you sure? You didn't have anything after we skated. Maybe you should have some water, just so you don't get dehydrated."

Tommy looks flustered, confused, embarrassed, and Sapnap realizes that he's kind of put the kid on the spot with his offer. Sapnap did the same thing back when Wilbur joined the team, unable to stand seeing a teammate of his suffer without doing something about it. He would just ask Wilbur what he needed, and Wilbur never had an answer. Wilbur could never see it, but he was clearly lacking, and Sapnap's hands twitch when the people around him aren't taken care of.

Even if it's just some random figure skater that he barely knows.

"I've got it," Sapnap says, then stands and goes to grab him some water. He doesn't know what Tommy prefers- cold or room temperature- so he just grabs both. And besides, two waters instead of one never killed anyone. When he comes back and places the two bottles down in front of the kid, Tommy still looks stunned.

"Thank you?" He says quietly, his brows furrowed, and Sapnap smiles tightly, just barely resisting

the urge to pat Tommy's shoulder as he goes.

When Sapnap sits down, Techno offers an approving look and George lightly kicks Sapnap's ankle under the table, teasing. Sapnap kicks him back and ignores his expression.

It's whatever. It was water. The kid needed it- no big deal.

(Somehow though, he feels like it might have been a big deal. Just a bit. At least to Tommy.)

Do you love yourself? I don't have to answer that. It should matter.

...

His coach isn't happy with him the next morning. And he makes it known- a lot.

"Are you forgetting why you're here?" He asks, making Tommy skate extra warm up laps. Tommy's too out of breath to answer. "You're here to win gold, Tommy. Let's run your short-skate routine from the top, no music. Don't stumble, or we're running it through from the beginning."

Tommy runs it through, once, twice, three times. He already knows it like the back of his hand, but now he's sure that he could perform it while sleeping and still get a record-breaking score. Wins and wins, that's what it's all about.

His coach works Tommy well into the afternoon, and then, when he thinks they're finished, he adds something new- something they've never talked about before. A routine with steps that Tommy is a bit too tired to understand.

He tries, and he doesn't think he fails- he went slow enough to make sure he got everything- but still-

"Oh come on, Tom. Even the junior skaters can pull this off. I mean, what are you even doing here? Just wasting my time? You want me to go find a skater to replace you?"

Tommy's head dips. "Sorry," he whispers.

"Yeah, I bet you are." He scoffs. "Fine. We're done for the day. If you knew what was good for you, you'd stay behind and work on that routine. Polish it up. I mean, if you cared at all about my time and wanted to- I don't know- *try* a little at some point."

And then he leaves Tommy standing there, debating internally with whether he has the energy to even make it to have something to eat. After a moment, Tommy turns away from the gate and does another circle around the rink- just one more time. So he doesn't disappoint anyone. Just one more.

By the time he lets himself off the ice, he doesn't even feel his body beyond the aches and pains of his skate- nothing else is really necessary.

Techno and George are having a rare quiet lunch together when Tommy comes stumbling through the cafeteria. Techno's eyes catch his straight backed, floating form, heading through towards the hall, where the common rooms and dorms are.

"Hey," he says quietly, catching George's attention. "Did Tommy come to breakfast this morning?"

George's eyes sharpen, casting around the room until he also sees the boy drifting by them. "No." He says disapprovingly. "He didn't."

Techno hums, then raises a hand. "Tommy," he waves. Tommy looks over, and he doesn't brighten or even relax, he just wordlessly shuffles over and slides in, next to Techno. "Hey, are you alright?"

The boy nods, but it's less of a nod and more of a slow slump, up and down. Techno wonders if he even *heard* the question. He wonders whether Tommy just says he's alright on instinct.

"You look tired, Tommy." George points out. "Are you?"

A head shake no.

"Are you lying?"

Another head shake no.

George looks at Technoblade, and his eyes say *what's your call?*

Clearly, the kid is exhausted. It's dripping off his every move. Even the rings of his blue eyes seem less vibrant, and the clean smell of ice follows him, so he clearly just got done with practice. Through the morning and well into the afternoon, it wouldn't surprise him if Tommy didn't eat at all today.

"Alright," he says, hoping he sounds unassuming. "Well, since you missed breakfast, here- I've got half a turkey sandwich here. You should try to get some of it down."

George pushes forward his unopened Gatorade and Techno smiles in thanks. "There's this Gatorade too- do you like Glacier Freeze, Tommy?"

The boy shrugs, but takes the drink from Techno all the same. They prod at him until he's eaten the whole half and drank most of the drink, and then, from there, they do their best to ignore the way he sways and can barely keep track of their conversation.

"-what I was saying was that he should try out a few practices, see how it feels. Maybe we'll have another teammate on the roster," George is saying, and Techno is listening, he *is*, but then there's a gentle, barely there weight against his side. George stops abruptly, then- "Techno."

Techno barely moves. "I see him, George. I see him."

Tommy, who'd been getting quieter and quieter, and swaying more and more, just slumped over, and is now laying with his head pillowed against Techno's side. Having even just that little bit of food must have been the last straw that tipped him over into sleeping.

"When do you think was the last time he slept well?" George asks.

"It couldn't have been recent," Techno says softly. Carefully, he shifts, leaning back and bringing Tommy with him, so Techno can bring his arm around the boy. Tommy follows, sound asleep. He even curls in, which makes Techno want to keep his arm around Tommy for forever. "Jesus. Look at him, George."

George takes a measured breath. "I see him, Techno. He's-" He doesn't finish. Cuts himself off before he can say anything, but Techno hears him.

Everything. He's everything.

They sit there, well after the cafeteria closes and George clears away their plates. Talking quietly, watching carefully, letting him rest as easily as he can. Of course it doesn't last- much too soon, he's twitching awake, rubbing his face and then turning bright red and yanking backwards when he realizes where he is.

"Oh god," he says, looking horrified. "Oh, God, I'm- I'm so sorry. I-"

"Sorry for what?" Techno asks. "You were tired. So you slept."

"I don't normally... *do* that." He admits, looking freaked out.

"What, sleep?" George frowns. "Tommy, you might have just needed a nap- it's not a big deal."

"Nap?" Tommy frowns. Barely, just barely, his nose wrinkles. "I don't- I'm fine. Really."

George isn't convinced. His eyebrow raises. " *I* take naps. I know when someone needs a nap. You should go take one."

"...can't." Tommy says softly. He presses a palm against his eye.

"Can't? You can't sleep or you aren't allowed?"

Tommy doesn't answer, and Technoblade, briefly, feels the urge to kill. Instead, he says:

"Well, how about this. If you're tired, you come and find one of us- *any* one of us- and we'll get you somewhere to rest. Somewhere where you won't be seen if you're looked for. That way you can have at the very least a half an hour of safe, uninterrupted rest. A nap."

"A nap?" Tommy questions, this time daring to sound a little hopeful. "You would do that for me?"

Techno and George exchange a look. He thinks, even at this point, that he'd do anything for him. George nods subtly, answering that unasked question, and Techno smiles, looking back down at the boy.

"Of course, Tommy." He says. "We'll give you little safety naps if you need them. Everyone needs rest every once in a while and *no* one should have to earn it."

George isn't sure that Technoblade's message sticks in Tommy's head, but then Tommy comes to him the next day, sheepish and pink and stuttering. George stares for just a moment, trying to understand what he's being told when Tommy finally manages to say the words *sleep*, and *nap*, and it clicks.

"Follow me," he says, turning and walking down the hall. He doesn't let himself think about the fact that Tommy came to him first before anyone else. He doesn't let himself think about how ashamed and embarrassed Tommy seemed to feel for asking for a simple place to rest. The only thing he thinks about are the shadows under the kid's eyes. The ones that shouldn't be there.

He leads Tommy to the trainers' medical center, and thankfully, since it's around eleven in the morning, it's pretty empty.

"I'm friends with one of the trainers," George explains to Tommy, who is blinking around at the medical supplies like he's never been to a center in his life. George wonders if Tommy has ever

gotten hurt in his life- or if he has, and whether it's been treated properly. "They'll let you rest here."

Ponk pokes their head out of the side room. "George? Is that you? Goodness, what did you bruise up this time?" He comes out fully, and stops when they see Tommy standing there. "Oh. Hello. Who's this?"

"This is Tommy," George says. "Tommy, this is Ponk."

"Hello," Tommy greets, nodding.

Ponk's eyes widen. "Oh- Oh, figure skating Tommy. You're- wow. You're amazing. I love watching your routines, man. They're so *perfect*."

George winces, but Tommy just smiles tiredly. "Thank you, I appreciate it. My coach is- he's a marvel."

"You're a marvel," Ponk corrects easily. "But what brings you here- and with George no less? Don't tell me you launched a puck at him by accident or something- I swear, George-"

"No," George rolls his eyes. "I only do that to Sapnap. Schlatt if he deserves it. No, I'm here because I need to ask a favor, if you could manage it."

"What *kind* of favor?"

"The kid needs a place to rest." George nods over to Tommy, who's studying his shoes. "His marvel of a coach won't give him two seconds off the ice to breathe."

The excitement in Ponk's expression fades. Overtaking it is some *intense* distaste. "Ah. I see. It's usually quiet here until one, so you can definitely rest here, Tommy. I've got a back room where we treat breaks or sprains. There's a cot there you can take."

"What if someone else needs it?" Tommy asks.

Ponk waves a hand, then guides Tommy over to the room. "I'll tell them to wait." They wink at Tommy and Tommy smiles, then steps inside. He pauses in the doorway though, and turns to look at George, real worry in his face.

"George, what if- I mean, my coach. What if he comes looking for me? What do I- What do I do?"

George, for just a moment, imagines Tommy, asleep in a backroom, thinking that he's safe and comfortable, and then being abruptly woken up by his coach, who's just mad at seeing his skater resting because he needs it. It would be a nightmare situation for Tommy and George knows he's not going to let that happen.

"I'll sit and keep watch," He offers. "I'll be right out here, in these chairs. If he comes I'll tell him that I don't know where you are."

"...Don't you have something else that you need to do?"

"Nothing as important as this," He says. Ponk gives him a look, but George is focused on the way that Tommy colors. George ushers him into the room and watches as he settles into the bed. When Tommy seems alright, he steps back and closes his door, then sits down in the chair and waits.

Of course, not twenty minutes later, a man, dressed in a light blue turtleneck comes into the room,

asking for Tommy. Ponk, a great actor, lies, pretending that he doesn't know who Tommy is, or like he's never even heard of the coach. The man is about to leave, but then he catches sight of George sitting there, staring balefully.

They lock eyes, and George *wants* so badly for him to say *anything*. Say a single bad thing about Tommy while George is sitting there protecting him, and George will not hesitate.

"Is Tommy in there?"

George inhales. Exhales. He looks the man up and down. He could lay him out. He *could*. Then he thinks about how Technoblade and Phil would not like to have to clean up his mess if he beats the shit out of a coach. "I don't know who Tommy is. And no, the only person in that room is someone with a twisted knee." He hums, cutting his gaze to the side like he doesn't care. "He might have to go home- no more Olympics. I'm sitting here as a sign of good sportsmanship or something."

Tommy's coach frowns. "How do you know that he's hurt that badly?"

George pauses. Then George smiles. "Because I'm the one who fucked up his knee." He lets that sink in for a moment. Then he goes, "you should find your player, coach. Can't compete without an athlete."

The coach doesn't need to be told twice. He's gone before George can blink.

He waits a moment before peeking into the darkened room behind him. Tommy is still under the covers, breathing deeply, his side rising and falling. George takes a breath, then moves his chair inside the room to watch him breathe. When he's settled, Ponk is leaning against the doorway, watching him with a smile on his face.

"What?" George asks.

"This is your kid, huh?" He says, nodding at Tommy.

George doesn't answer, rolling his eyes, but in his head, to himself, he thinks *yes*. *Yes he is*.

All it takes is one nap. That's it.

One nap and Tommy begins to notice how tired he is all the time, and then how hungry he is, and then how cold he is. All the time. He'll wake up early in the morning and want to rest from the moment he opens his eyes until the moment he gets off the ice at night and makes it back to his room.

He wasn't like this before. Before he could go for weeks and not feel the slightest bit tired. He could practice and practice and practice until he was perfect and think about nothing else. But now, he can't. Now, he's weaker.

Tommy's in the common room, his legs folded on the lounge with Wilbur laying on the couch at his side and Techno on the arm chair, his feet up on the cushion. They're close enough that Tommy feels comforted by their presence, but not too close that he feels suffocated. It makes Tommy loosen a little, makes him feel like dozing off, knowing that if he did, they'd still be here when he woke up.

And it's that thought that ultimately makes him say what's on his mind.

"Do you think I'm getting weak?"

Wilbur sits up immediately, turning like Tommy's said something insane. Even Techno, who is normally very relaxed, seems appalled.

"What do you mean?" Techno asks, intense.

Tommy looks down at his hands. "I don't know. I'm all distracted now. Coach says it all the time. I'm not able to practice as much as I used to because I'm too busy with other things."

Wilbur leans back slightly. "You're much more tired and you don't understand why."

Tommy nods. He expects Wilbur to say something, but he doesn't, he just looks over to Techno like *help. Please, help.*

"No," Techno says. "No, Tommy, this isn't weakness. This is your body telling you what you need because you're finally listening. Before, you couldn't let yourself listen because you thought you would get in trouble for it, but now that you know you won't, you're starting to feel safe doing so. You're starting to feel tired and hungry and sick. These things are good. Especially if you take care of it."

"Yeah," Wilbur speaks up. "Did you eat anything before practice?"

Tommy nods again. "I had a salad."

Wilbur smiles like he's proud. Tommy feels himself straighten, even though it wasn't really anything too big. Just a salad. But Wilbur's smile makes Tommy want to keep taking care of himself. "Alright, then let's get you something tastier, yeah? A reward for doing well." He stands, then opens his hands. Tommy, slowly, lays his own cold hands into Wilbur's warm ones. "You've taken care of the nutrition, let *me* take care of the sweets. Have you ever had hot chocolate, sunshine?"

Tommy stops still at the pet name. His hands slip out of Wilbur's.

Sunshine. Sunshine. *Sunshine.*

It's a cute nickname. Very sweet. Tommy imagines that in another life, he would've loved being called that. In another life, Tommy would probably preen under the title. But here, now, Tommy doesn't hear Wilbur's gentle playful tone, he doesn't hear fondness, he hears his coach. He hears sweet words being spit at him, nice things being said sarcastically- all the things that Tommy's ever wished he'd be called being twisted around into something awful. No one would ever call him something sweet and be genuine about it. No one. Ever.

"Tommy? Tommy?" Wilbur asks, sounding frantic, pulling Tommy out of his head, pulling him out of the overwhelming anxiety buzzing in his chest. "Tommy, I'm sorry, are you alright? I didn't-"

"Wilbur," Techno says. He's firm and steady. "Wilbur, back up. Just a little." He listens, giving Tommy enough room to take a breath. "Tommy, are you okay?"

Slowly, very slowly, Tommy nods. A measured dip of the head.

Techno looks a bit skeptical. "Can you tell me with words, kid?"

"Yeah-" He makes himself say. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"Good. Good." Techno nods. "Okay. Do you want to tell us what went wrong? Something that

happened just made you feel unsafe. Can you tell us what it is?"

Tommy looks wary. In his lap, his hands fold together, holding tight. "Nothing. I was just--"

"We won't use it against you." Wilbur blurts. "If that's what you're worried about, Tommy." And *that* makes Tommy stop, because yeah, that is what he was worried about.

Anytime he's brought something up with his coach, admitted that something bothered him, it would be fine for a little until later, it was brought up again, used against him. In interviews as a joke that Tommy has no choice but to laugh politely at, or on the rink, just the two of them, where Tommy can't possibly win an argument. Tommy can't speak his discomfort about anything, because it's a two pronged sword hitting only him in the gut.

"I promise." Techno says softly, reaching forward and offering his hand. "Nothing that you ever tell us will be used against you, Tommy. You can trust us."

Hesitantly, Tommy puts his hand in Techno's, his heart racing. He desperately wants to believe him. Him and Wilbur, both. "Okay. Sorry, I just- I don't like the nicknames."

"Sunshine?" Wilbur clarifies, and he doesn't *sound* mad. He sounds confused. Upset. Imploring. He sounds like he wants to understand.

Tommy winces. "No, sorry."

"Don't apologize," Techno reminds absently, brushing a thumb over Tommy's wrist. Tommy's pulse, which was fluttering frantically, starts to slow down. "Can you tell us why?"

Tommy inhales. "My coach," he starts, and Wilbur's face darkens. The hand holding Tommy's tightens, just barely. "He uses them when he talks to me. It's never...nice."

"Tommy, I would never, *ever*-"

"Then we won't use them." Techno cuts off. "Not if you aren't comfortable."

"No, of course." Wilbur says, looking pained. "Of course not, no. Not if you're- Jesus, no."

"Oh." Tommy blinks. He tries to ignore the suspicion that he can feel pressing in. He wants to believe them. He wants to believe that they would never hurt him. He wishes it wasn't so hard. "Thanks. Sorry."

Wilbur comes over at that, just to kneel at Techno's side. He, after a brief moment of deliberation, lays his hand on top of Techno and Tommy's. He squeezes lightly. "Don't apologize, Tommy. Please don't. You have nothing to say sorry for. You spoke up for yourself against something that made you uncomfortable. I'm *glad* that you did. It would've made me feel awful to know that I hurt you, even unknowingly. The only thing I'm really upset about is the fact that your coach ruined something so special for you. He doesn't deserve to have that power over you. No one does."

Tears well in Tommy's eyes, shocking him a bit. He shouldn't be crying but- it feels so nice to hear that. To hear that it isn't his fault for once. That he wasn't the one who did something wrong. Someone hurt him, and he couldn't have done something to stop it.

"Can I hug you, Tommy?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy doesn't have to think before he's nodding and getting swept into gentle arms. Wilbur holds him, and slowly, Tommy clings back, thinking that maybe, just this once, he's allowed to have this.

“Incoming,” Techno murmurs, and from around the corner, Tommy can hear voices- Schlatt and Quackity and Sapnap, all arguing amongst themselves. When they come into view, George leading them, Tommy peeks at them from over Wilbur’s shoulder, still being hugged. And then, following them comes a shorter blond man, also wearing the team colors.

“Everything alright?” George asks sharply, catching Tommy’s teary eyes and watching the way Wilbur slowly lets him go.

“Yeah, everything’s good,” Techno reassures. Tommy wants to melt into their sides and hide, a bit unnerved by the sight of who must be their coach. Coaches, historically, don’t exactly like him. They like what he can do and the things that he can achieve, but nothing past that.

“Tommy,” Wilbur says, “meet Phil- he’s the one that we drive up a wall professionally.”

Phil steps forward, smiling good-naturedly. “That is true, you all are professionals at that. Hiya, mate. It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you from these little shits.”

What does that mean?

“Nice to meet you too, sir,” Tommy says politely, hoping none of his confusion shows on his face.

Sapnap bursts into loud laughter. “Sir? Oh god, Tommy, don’t call Phil sir, he’ll crumple like a can of soda.”

Phil turns. Glares half-heartedly at his player. “You know, just because you don’t respect me doesn’t mean someone else can’t.” But when he turns back, he’s smiling again, all light. “But no, you don’t have to call me sir, Tommy. Just Phil works well. Being called sir makes me feel so old.”

“You’re out of your hockey days, Phil,” Techno teases. “You’re an old, old man now.”

“Yeah, well, this old, old man controls the amount of time you get on the rink- don’t push me.”

And normally, that would be a threat. If Tommy heard his coach say something like that, he’d shrink and immediately apologize as best he could, but Technoblade doesn’t. The man just grins and steps back, casually stopping Schlatt and Sapnap from where they’re beginning to wrestle in the lobby.

“Time for practice?” Wilbur asks. Phil nods, then, surprisingly, turns to Tommy.

“Unfortunately, I’ve got to steal these guys away from you for a bit, but don’t be afraid to drop in on a practice if you ever need a place to be.” He says. “They’re closed to everyone but you.”

Tommy, who’s gotten really good at reading in between the lines, can hear the *your coach would not be allowed in* tucked in there. Oh, he thinks, pleasantly surprised. Phil is like his team. Nice. Safe.

“Thank you, sir.” He says. Phil gives him a look, and Tommy ducks his head. “Phil.” He corrects. “Thank you, Phil.”

This is where he trots out his sadness. Little black cloud, little black umbrella.

...

Ranboo takes quick notice- Tommy opens up more and more to them everyday. It's *great*.

They only practice three days a week, twice at night under the lights and once in the mornings, so any other time they're either relaxing, working out, or going out with their coach Niki. Everytime they go, they make a point of stopping to ask Tommy. Even if he's lacing up his shoes to head down to the dance studio or packing his gym bag, or isn't even there in the room- they text, or stop him and pointedly ask, *hey, do you want to come with us? Want to go ice fishing, or walk a trail, or head to a reserve?*

When they manage to catch him in person and ask, he at least *thinks* about it before saying no. And every time, it takes him longer and longer to say no, longer and longer to deny himself from going out and having fun with them, until one day, he shyly says *sure. Yes*.

They're both a bit stunned, not expecting that, and Tommy very nearly takes it back, but then Tubbo jumps in and rushes Tommy to get ready.

Now they're here, standing on a snow tubing deck and staring out at the hills and hills of snow that stretch all the way off into the distance, with little black and navy blue dots racing down them.

"Fuck," Tubbo sums up, and Ranboo has to nod.

"Oh yeah," he grins. Now Ranboo will be the first person to admit that he's a bit of an adrenaline junkie. Maybe not to the extent of Tubbo, who picked up mountain *climbing* after mastering the art of sliding down it, but still, he'd say he's always chasing that high of a thrill.

Looking at that *huge* snowy hill, with people speeding down it at speeds that make them blur, all in just *tubes*- Ranboo feels just a tad out of his area.

"Is this what snow tubing is?" Ranboo asks, just to be sure and Niki, who's standing a bit behind them, tucking their tickets into her pocketbook, tsks.

"This is it," she answers cheerily. "You wanted a mountain that you don't have to practice on, and here you are."

"This seems..." Ranboo's eyes cut to Tommy, who is staring at the glass with wide, wide eyes. He hasn't said a word yet. "What do you think, Tommy?"

That wide-eyed gaze shifts to Ranboo. "Um. It looks very- fast. Fun? I think? I'm not- sorry, I don't know."

"There's no right answer, dear," Niki reassures. "But it does look both fast and fun."

Tubbo squints at Tommy for a moment. Ranboo is about to tell him to cut it out because he's freaking Tommy out, but then he blurts, "Okay! I've got it. We'll start on the smallest hill and see how that feels."

Oh. Oh, Ranboo *loves* his best friend.

Tommy relaxes a bit, but still goes, "You all snowboard. Wouldn't you want to go on the biggest hill? I wouldn't want to make you stop-"

Tubbo shakes his head. "Nope! Shut up, we're doing the little hill first. We invited you to hang out with *you*, Tommy. Not to have fun while you watch. We're not gonna leave you behind and we're definitely not gonna do something if you don't want to."

Ranboo grins proudly, and that's how they end up on the smallest hill first, waiting in line with their tubes. Tubbo looks up the physics and safety of tubes on ice and quietly, Tommy asks how he manages to ride a stick down a mountain, which makes Ranboo laugh so hard he nearly dies right there in line.

"This doesn't look too bad from here," Tubbo says, sitting himself in his tube easily, but Ranboo's eyes are on Tommy, and the way he cringes back, trying to hide his fear.

"Hey," Ranboo says, "come get in my tube, Tommy. If you're scared, you can close your eyes and I'll watch for you."

"Really?"

Ranboo nods and Tommy takes his hand, letting Ranboo help him into the tube. "Hold on," he instructs, and Tommy slowly holds onto Ranboo's waist. "Ready?"

Ranboo hears Tommy mumble a yes, and then they're off, sliding down the hill. It's the shortest one, so there's just one bump that's relatively small, but Ranboo feels Tommy's arms tighten around him all the same.

When they get down to the bottom, Tommy let's go and Ranboo turns to look at him. He's just opening his eyes, but he's smiling, his cheeks red from the cold.

Tubbo, who went ahead of them, sticks out a hand to help Tommy out of the tube. "How was it?"

Tommy takes a moment to find his voice, and then says, "let's do the next one."

And they go on and on, to every hill. Everytime, Ranboo reminds Tommy that he's here to hold onto and Tubbo cheers loudly like nothing could ever hurt them. Ranboo doesn't know for sure, but he thinks that they're doing a good job of making Tommy feel safe as he's sliding down hills of ice.

Pretty soon, they're staring at the biggest hill now, back in that observation deck, warming their limbs before going again. Tommy, Ranboo's been watching, looks nervous- more so than usual- but he's watching the people shooting past like he's considering it.

"I'm ready to go if you all are," Ranboo says impulsively. And it's true- he's had a *great* time with them. It was exhilarating. Ranboo doesn't need to end it off with the huge hill. He's content for the day to end just like this. It would be ruined if he felt like he made Tommy do something that he didn't want to.

But Tubbo doesn't seem to share the same sentiment, because he leans over and shushes Ranboo, and then looks to Tommy.

"Tommy?" He asks, voice perfectly balanced. "What do *you* think?"

Tommy's quiet for a moment, his brow furrowing deeper. His eyes flit down to his own steady hands. "I think I want to try it," he says quietly. "I want to try the big one."

Tubbo grins, grabbing Ranboo's arm and nearly shaking him in his own excitement. Ranboo knows Tubbo well enough to know that isn't excitement for just a big hill to slide down.

Tommy is choosing to do this. No one else but him.

They go, and Niki shares her tube with Tubbo, while Ranboo doesn't even have to say anything

before Tommy is climbing in with him, locking his arms carefully around Ranboo's waist.

"Ready?" Ranboo asks, as he always does, and Tommy hums, squeezing slightly, shutting his eyes.

It's an amazing hill, and they catch air on some of the bumps- enough to make Ranboo's stomach swoops the way he's been craving- but what *really* gets him aren't the bumps or the snow flying up in clouds. It's that this time, halfway down the hill, Ranboo hears Tommy gasp, and he knows without looking that his eyes are open- that he's watching the world pass them in a blur. It takes only a half a second, but then he's yelling, squeezing Ranboo even tighter, laughing delightedly in his ear. Beautiful and reckless and loud. It's an amazing sound that Ranboo wants to hear all the time.

He thinks back to the Tommy that was confused when they asked him how he was, and the Tommy that came in late and left early without a word. He thinks back to the Tommy that didn't look up and didn't speak over a certain volume. The one who looked like he was just *existing* rather than living, and Ranboo realizes that he'd do anything to keep *this* Tommy, the real, unburdened Tommy, with them.

When they hit the bottom of the hill, maybe Tommy doesn't jump up and cheer like Tubbo does, but he buries his breathless smile in the back of Ranboo's shoulder and asks if they could possibly do that again.

Niki loves spending money on her boarders.

Sneeg teases her, saying that she's much too kind for her profession, but sports are supposed to be about passion and love- and she's never been more passionate about Tubbo and Ranboo and the talent that they possess. Of course she'll display that by treating them to things every once in a while. They give her one hundred percent in practices and events, it's the least that she can do.

She takes them inside- after going down a few more hills- and offers to buy them all some nice steaming mugs of hot chocolate. When she asks Tommy what kind he wants he shakes his head.

"No hot chocolate?" She questions. "It's really not a hassle at all- I'm already getting some for these two. I might as well make it three."

But still, Tommy shakes his head. "Sorry, I just promised I'd try it with Wilbur first. He's an ice hockey player. We're- um- we hang out sometimes."

Niki hums in understanding. She isn't even surprised that he's trying it for the first time- she knows full well how some coaches restrict certain types of food in training. Especially during the Olympics. "Well," she says, "if you don't get that mug, you come knock on my door and I'll get you out to get some."

They sit at a little circular table and she watches Tubbo and Ranboo blow off their steaming hot mugs. Well, she watches Ranboo blow his- Tubbo just goes straight in without a single care in the world. Niki can tell that he burns his tongue, but he still keeps drinking like a maniac.

"Jack was upset that we went without him," she mentions, and Ranboo grins.

"Jack's always upset whenever anything happens without him." Tubbo huffs, sticking out his tongue like the cold air will un-burn it. "He's annoying, is what he is. Oh, Tommy, you would hate Jack- do you know him?"

Tommy shakes his head.

“Jack Manifold, skier- he skis with Fundy? I think he’s friends with Technoblade, or something, but I still think Jack just says that because saying you’re friends with Techno is impressive.”

“He’s not that bad,” Ranboo defends lightly, but Niki laughs.

“He’s a little bit bad.” She says. “Just a bit. But skiers and snowboarders have a bit of a thing. We love to hate on one another. All in good fun, of course. But what about you, Tommy? I can’t say that I know much of anything about the figure skating world. How is that?”

Tommy, who seemed content to just listen to them talk, dims a bit. “Oh, it’s- uh, it’s great. I love it. Events are always really challenging, and my free skate will be a bit hard, but I think it’ll be rewarding when it’s over, so.”

“What music did you choose?” Tubbo asks. Tommy blinks.

“Choose?”

“Yeah, don’t you get to pick your music?” He asks. “My sister, Lani, started figure skating a couple years ago, and her favorite part is picking out the music and the costumes. She used to skate to a lot of disney, and now I know all the words to the whole Moana soundtrack.”

“Oh, I don’t-” Tommy falters a bit. “I don’t get to pick the music or anything. I just- I don’t know, I just do what I’m told.” Niki frowns a little. “I mean, at this level, it’s what will best appeal to the panel and what choreography works with the music.”

Niki resists the urge to sigh. She’s heard rumors about ice skaters and their coaches, but she thought- she hoped- that it would be different. But no, these kids are still just puppets to their coaches’ whims.

“How is your coach?” She asks, even though she pretty much has a clear idea. She just wants to see how *Tommy* sees his coach. “Is he nice? Do you like him?”

Tommy pauses. “He’s- um- I appreciate all that he does for me. All that he...teaches me.”

Oh Jesus. Niki thinks. This is bad. She doesn’t need any more context than that to see it.

“He has you practicing all the time,” Tubbo says loudly. And it’s a clumsy way of hiding his anger and telling Niki what he really thinks and how the coach really is, but Niki appreciates it nonetheless. “He’s annoying. I’ve never talked to him and he pisses me off.”

Tommy smiles a little- taking secret delight in his coach’s slander. “It’s not that bad, Tubbo.”

“It’s a little bad,” Ranboo protests. “I want to hang out with you, man. He’s in the way.”

“I mean- he just- he wants me to be better, is all. I should be better.”

“Practice everyday isn’t the best way to go,” Niki says softly. “Not always. Consistency is everything, but rest is too. You should rest, almost as much as you work. Just to stay healthy. If your coach doesn’t understand that, then he shouldn’t be a coach.”

He looks uncomfortable hearing that- and Niki imagines so, because how many people have the balls to genuinely bash on an Olympic coach. Niki certainly doesn’t give a fuck. Children are children, and she bets if she told Sneeg he’d feel the exact same way. It’s so easy for them to get

lost in the medals, but keeping track of the players- the children- under their care, is the most important thing.

"But anyway," she says, moving on. "What the heck even is a free skate? How is that any different from anything else that you do?"

Tommy eases, and is able to carefully launch into the explanation, leaving Niki to internally note that Tommy's coach is one that needs to be watched out for- if not casually monitored.

They're all hanging out in Sapnap and Quackity's room when Wilbur gets the idea.

They're lounging around, talking, arguing, throwing shit at each other, as Tommy rests in Sapnap's bed. It's a sight to see, the lithe, small body curled into Schlatt's jacket and buried under Sapnap's blankets, half asleep and safe. Wilbur will admit, he likes seeing Tommy covered in their hockey stuff- their jackets and hoodies and sweatshirts and jerseys.

He hopes that Tommy sees it as what it is, a badge of protection. An announcement, to anyone who looks at him: *this is our kid and he is under our watch*. He wants Tommy to wear them and go out in front of his asshole coach and have the man be *terrified*. He wants to growl at the man, *Tommy is ours, you can't touch him now. Don't even try*.

Of course, he can't- no one can touch an Olympic level coach. Least of all them, the players.

But the idea. Seeing Tommy shrouded in them gives Wilbur the thought-

"We should teach Tommy some hockey."

Sapnap perks up almost instantly, eyes brightening. "Wilbur, that is the best idea you've ever had. Tommy with a stick? Dude, imagine he does a figure skating routine with a hockey stick- coin that idea right now. No one else can have it."

"Figure skaters need both their arms for balance, dumbass." George sighs, but even he's got an excited gleam in his eyes. The idea appeals to him too. "A stick would just throw him off."

"Yeah, how would he do his jumps with a stick in his hand?" Schlatt asks, reaching out to flick Sapnap's head.

"Cut the jumps," Sapnap points out. "Duh. No jumps means he can hold the hockey stick, and then we might as well add a puck and a net while we're at it. His next routine is just him playing hockey in front of those dumb judges."

"Dumb?" Wilbur asks, amused.

"Yeah, if they're not giving Tommy a one hundred or whatever just off seeing him, then the system is fucked. That's why hockey is best." Sapnap nods. "We put Tommy out on the ice and every other team will just melt instantly."

"And anyone who doesn't, gets clobbered!" Quackity cheers, and it must be just a little too loud, because Tommy shifts, picking up his head, his mused hair falling into his sleepy eyes.

"Who's getting clobbered?" He yawns, entirely relaxed even amongst their general volume. "What's happened?"

"They're being dumb," Techno says gently. "Did you sleep alright?"

"Mhm," Tommy nods, stretching out a little then pulling himself back into a small ball, not unlike a warm and happy cat. "Thank you."

"It's my bed," Sapnap whines.

Tommy looks over, a little smile on his face. "Thank you, Sapnap," he indulges, and Sapnap beams.

"Boom. I won." Sapnap cheers. Techno rolls his eyes. "And I will continue to win when we teach Tommy to play hockey."

The small smile on Tommy's face drops instantly, and they *all* take notice.

"Hey," Wilbur shifts closer, looking to soothe. "Everything alright? You've only slept an hour, so you're not late for anything. Don't worry."

"No, I-" he stops himself, looks down at the blankets. He looks nervous- afraid for some reason. Wilbur hates that- hates that he doesn't know *what* Tommy is scared of. Hates that he can't immediately strike it down. "I don't know. The hockey. Maybe I shouldn't-"

"What?" Schlatt asks. "Have fun?" Quackity hits his arm. "What? The kid's coach is a fuckass. I can't speak the truth now?"

Techno ignores them, leans closer to Tommy. "You don't have to if you don't want to. It was just a suggestion to spend more time together with your friends."

And then-and this is what makes Wilbur's heart break- Tommy blinks. "Friends?" He asks, like he's simultaneously hopeful and terrified of the word.

Techno, as always, remains outwardly steady. "Yeah," he answers simply. "We're friends, Tommy."

That small smile comes back. Little beam of light peeking through. "Oh. Yeah, okay. But I don't know. I'll think about it."

"That's okay," Wilbur nods. "None of us are, or would be upset if you didn't want to, right?"

A chorus of yes's ring around the room. That makes Tommy relax back into what he was before- and Wilbur rushes to find a new conversation topic in order to keep him that way.

Tommy leaves Sapnap and Quackity's room feeling well-rested and steady and more alert than ever. It's like every time he gets a chance to rest, he comes back just a bit stronger than before. Especially when he gets to sleep by the team. Of course, it doesn't escape his knowledge that they're huge and loud and clumsy and could probably snap Tommy in half in a second, but Tommy isn't afraid of them. They're probably the last things on Earth that he is afraid of- they're the one thing he can trust.

He's got to shake it off now- he's got to be down at the rink in ten. Tommy's about to head to his room to grab his stuff when the door behind him opens and closes again.

"Tommy." Tommy turns, blinking at Wilbur, who looks a little awkward standing there. Nervous, maybe. "Hey, sorry, I just- I wanted to ask a question."

"Yeah?"

"Uh, I just wanted to know about the hockey thing. Was there a reason why you didn't think it would work out- or..."

Tommy bites his lip.

How does he even *try* to explain? *Sorry Wilbur, I can't bear the idea of trying something new because what if I'm not good at it? What if that's the final straw?* Or, even: *Hey Wilbur, I'm sorry, I just am already pretty basic at the one thing I've been doing my whole life- how could I manage trying something new?*

Tommy is supposed to be perfect. That is what he is allowed. Nothing else.

(And, deep down inside, he can't help but be a little selfish. These guys don't *care* about figure skating- not the way Tommy's coach does. They don't make him land jumps to hang out with him. But if they find out that Tommy can't play the sport that they love? Then what? And the idea of them teaching him? Of them talking to him the way his coach does? Tommy thinks that would tear him apart. He knows that he's worthless- he doesn't need to hear it from the people that call him a friend.)

"No, I just- I don't know." Tommy lies. "It seems like a lot. All of you and the ice and-"

"That makes sense," Wilbur rushes out. "That makes sense, of course. It would be a lot. I just thought it would be fun, you know? I mean, you're teaching me your sport- I'd love to teach you some of mine."

That does sound nice, Tommy thinks. He remembers Wilbur on the ice learning how to glide- that smile on his face, the glee in his eyes. Tommy would love to feel like that when trying something new, instead of just panic and stress.

"It does sound fun," he whispers, almost to himself, and Wilbur brightens just a tad.

"Doesn't it?" He goes. "I mean, I get it if you say no, so don't feel like you have to agree, but what if it was just us on the ice? Like that first time? That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Tommy shakes his head slowly. No, it wasn't. Tommy's only got fond memories of that.

"Yeah, so we could do that for hockey if you wanted. Just to spend a little more time together."

And Tommy thinks about it. Thinks about Wilbur's goofy smiles and his careful touches and *friends*, and finds himself nodding in agreement. All on his own- just saying yes.

Of course, in response, Wilbur just grins, ecstatic.

He wants in, he wants out, he wants the antidote. He stands in front of the mirror with a net, hoping to catch something.

...

Everything is much better from there.

Tommy and Wilbur go out on the ice after dinner more often than not, and eventually Tommy learns the correct way to hold a hockey stick and shoot on-goal and Wilbur learns what a three turn is and how to do one.

Being on the ice with Wilbur is actually *fun*. It's so easy to just *be* when Tommy is around him. He makes everything so relaxed. Even when Tommy makes an obvious mistake, all Wilbur does is laugh, and not in a rude way either- just joyous. Happiness is so easy for Wilbur, it's awe-inspiring.

Slowly, Tommy becomes not only a fixture at his side, but also his team's. He finds himself walking at Technoblade's side, with his shaking hand safe in the man's steady ones, he finds himself with Quackity's jacket laid over his shoulders, keeping him warm when he shivers, he finds himself with George at his back like some kind of bodyguard, looking out for any sign of his coach coming around the corner.

Slowly but surely, he realizes that they would never hurt him. Never. Not purposefully like some would.

And Tommy, half asleep with his head on Wilbur's lap in a window alcove the man found for Tommy to rest in, finally says, "I think I'd like to try playing hockey."

"Hm?" Wilbur goes, distracted even though all he's doing is watching Tommy breathe.

"With the team." Tommy clarifies. He's a bit nervous, but recognition enters Wilbur's expression quickly.

"Oh. Oh!" He smiles. "You'd want to practice a bit of hockey with them- oh, that's great Tommy!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he nods, then reaches down and brushes a gentle thumb against Tommy's hairline. Tommy's eyes close. He feels so at peace. "They'd love that. They love-"

He stops. Tommy opens his eyes, and sees Wilbur watching him with a weird expression on his face. Eyes wide and watery, but gentle. So, so gentle. Tommy doesn't know what it means.

"They love what, Wil?"

Wilbur breathes. "Hockey," he manages. "They love hockey. I love hockey. And- and they'll love playing it with you."

Tommy relaxes, closes his eyes again. "Ice hockey players." He mumbles affectionately. "You and your sticks."

They slowly build up to playing hockey with all of them- first Techno, who teaches Tommy how to keep his eyes on the puck while skating, then George, who teaches Tommy how to use his body to block other people's sight, then Schlatt, who teaches Tommy how to do a move that might cost a penalty without actually *getting* one (*some people call it dirty, but not the refs, so what else matters-*), then Quackity, who emphasizes speed, and then finally, Sapnap, who shows Tommy how to take a bump and let it roll off him.

Wilbur is there the whole time, of course, skating around them and keeping Tommy stable as he focuses.

It's so much better than Tommy thought it would be. They're so gentle and easy with him. If he makes a mistake, they just correct him- or in Quackity's case, laugh good naturedly. He's not a *waste of time* or *slow* or a *disappointment*- he's *learning fast* or *doing well* or *fucking killing it, Tommy!*

And anytime he looks over, Wilbur is smiling that smile- the one Tommy still doesn't understand, but knows is good. It makes Tommy feel good. Good about them and good about himself.

"Alright," Techno says. He drifts out onto the ice, stick in one hand, puck in the other. "Let's just take this slow now. Light scrimmage- nothing too wild."

Tommy holds his own stick tight, blinking nervously by the goal. He's on Techno's team, which is great for him, but awful because Techno is actually *good*. Wouldn't he want to win? Wouldn't Tommy just hinder him?

"Let's have some fun, yeah?" Techno asks, then looks over, making eye-contact with Tommy. He's smiling. It makes it easy for Tommy to smile too. "Let's play."

Tommy doesn't do much for the first couple of minutes. He gets a little caught up- forgets that he's on the ice and playing, because he's busy watching Sapnap and George fight each other for control of the puck. They're bumping and hitting each other, but they're both laughing- well, Sapnap is, rather loudly, whereas George just has this vicious little grin on his face. Then it all comes to a stop when Quackity swoops in and takes the puck from both of them with a loud whoop.

"Come on," Wilbur skids over next to Tommy. "You should join in."

"Where?" Tommy asks. He keeps watching, trying to find the rhythm- trying to find a place where he can just slip into the seams of it all, but it looks wild. Schlatt chases after Quackity, who doesn't even try to make it to either goal. He's content just to play keepaway and make them all frustrated. George keeps swiping at Sapnap's heels, and Techno slides in front of Quackity, herding him in whatever direction he wants. Nothing about it is organized, or even thought out.

"Anywhere you want," Wilbur says. He turns and then starts skating backward, closer and closer to the fray. "Hockey is about making space for yourself. So come on Tommy. Come out here and fight for your space."

And then he goes, and Tommy hesitates for just a second before following.

He drifts around the edges of the rink, just watching them all play for a bit- watching the way the puck moves. He's not very good with the stick, but there are three things he does know: patterns, speed control, and patience. He's learned to be very patient when learning all his jumps and tricks, and it works here, letting him circle around and around until he finds the perfect opening. And when he sees it, he doesn't let himself hesitate before speeding in much like Quackity, wiggling through Technoblade and Sapnap, and stealing the puck from Schlatt.

"Hey!" He yells.

"Go Tommy!" Quackity cheers.

Clumsily, Tommy maneuvers the puck down the ice, but just before he can shoot, Sapnap slides into his way, blocking the goal. He's got a huge grin on his face, and Tommy would even go as far to say that it's proud. But still, he's in Tommy's way.

Make space for yourself, Wilbur said.

Alright then- he will.

Tommy brings the puck all the way over to the left, and when Sapnap turns to defend- probably expecting him to go around the goal like a normal hockey player would, Tommy just spins quickly

the other way, letting the puck fly. He gets the shot off, Tommy can tell, but not before Sapnap grows keen and tries to stop him. The puck slips by, but Sapnap jolts forward, bumping Tommy- and Tommy, not yet used to keeping his balance without his hands, falls back on his ass, hitting the ice hard.

The rink goes quiet.

Then-

“Oh my god, Tommy, fuck, I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” Sapnap blurts, dropping his stick and covering his mouth with his hands. “Are you alright? I’m so sorry, I-”

Techno skates closer, kneeling down, his face concerned. “Tommy? Are you hurt?”

Tommy inhales, then slowly picks himself up off the ice, Techno rises with him, hands out like Tommy would topple over. And he almost feels like he might- not from the hit or the fall, but just because he’s stunned. He hurts. The fall was just as bad as any of his falls in practice, and he knows that later he’ll have a bruise to show it, but still, this feels different. This is his. It’s a mark that he got the way that he chose. He said yes to playing hockey with his friends and maybe he got hurt, but before it, he was happy.

He made space for himself, and the pain didn’t bowl him over. He’s still standing.

“Tommy?” Techno asks again, worried.

He was happy. He *is* happy. Tommy is happy.

He grins, laughing breathlessly and jumping at Techno. He skates around him and over to Sapnap, who’s still standing there with concerned eyes, in front of a goal with Tommy’s puck in it.

“I scored, didn’t I?” He asks. “Didn’t I, Tech? That’s one to zero, right?”

Sapnap turns, looks behind him at the ice, then turns back. “...Yeah.” He sounds excited now- there’s no doubt in Tommy’s mind that he’s proud now. “One to zero. Not for long though. Reset guys, I’m crushing this kid.”

The next day, for the whole day, there is no sign of Tommy.

When Ranboo and Tubbo come downstairs for breakfast, they tell them that he was up before they woke up and didn't text to let them know where he was going.

Quackity proposes that they look, and they do- checking the studio and the rinks and the gyms- but they can't find him anywhere. It's almost as if he's not there .

He's just- gone.

There's a reason why Tommy just does what he's told.

Everything, *everything* can always get worse.

"You've been slacking," His coach says. "Give me a triple lutz."

Immediately, Tommy moves, not letting himself think twice. He pulls around the ice, builds speed and leaps into the air, one-two-three rotations, land, balance. Breathe after. Always after.

"Slow," he's told. "All that time spent *snow tubing*, I bet."

Tommy stiffens.

"Yeah, I bet you thought I didn't know. You think that I'm an idiot? Are you running around here thinking that I'm not *watching* you throw yourself away? You're at the Olympics and you're acting like you're back home, in the middle of nowhere." He spits. "What a waste."

Tommy pauses on the ice, lowering his gaze, waiting for further instruction. He wasn't told to move, so he doesn't. He wasn't told to respond, so he doesn't. He just listens.

"All these distractions- hockey players and spending time taking *naps* and playing *games*," he growls. "Double salchow. Now."

Tommy moves.

He gains speed around the rink, then- backward right edge, turn three, take off, arms in position, to catch him when he lands on the ice.

He barely remembers to breathe after.

"Not enough height."

Of course, Tommy thinks. He felt that. He was low. He wasn't- it wasn't good. Not good enough.

"You see what having *friends* does to you, *snowflake*? You want to dance around on the ice and lose *my* points at the Olympics?" He asks, and Tommy can feel tears, from deep inside him, building. "No. Absolutely not. You are *mine*. Your points are mine. Your jumps are mine. Don't you dare forget it. I am the only one who wants you the way that you are."

Tommy presses his fingers against his sides, straight lines, just to keep himself from pressing them against his burning eyes.

"You're not coming off that ice until you remember why we're here. And since we're off arena, no one will interrupt looking for their rink time. Here is where you are and here is where you will stay." He says. Tommy's heart sinks.

In anticipation, his legs already burn. It's mental, he knows. Pain is mental, but- God. Confined to the ice. Chained to victory. How is he supposed to live like this?

"Triple Lutz double toe loop combination," He demands. "Three of them. If you fall, start over. I only want to hear from you when you're done. Then I'll tell you what's next."

Tommy opens his mouth, but then closes it. He doesn't want to hear anything, Tommy was told not to speak-

His coach smirks. "Go on, snowflake. Thank me."

"Thank you, coach." Tommy whispers, head low. "Thank you."

He hums, self satisfied, and waves Tommy off. Of course, Tommy goes.

He does his first three, then goes through his short skate routine, then another three, and by then, Tommy wants to pass out on the ice. He can't, of course, but what he can do is think, *Jesus, is anything worth going through this? Isn't it just easier to obey?*

If he didn't have friends, then he wouldn't be in this situation, he thinks, spots dancing across his vision as he goes for another jump. He doesn't really know why he's practicing these, because they're not in any of his routines. Just a punishment, he supposes.

Does he really deserve it?

No, a voice in his head goes. It sounds like Technoblade. It sounds like Wilbur. It sounds like George and Quackity and Schlatt and Sapnap. *No. You don't deserve that. You deserve so, so, much more.*

When he skates around, waiting for more instructions, his legs burn and his mind is distant. His coach is talking, telling him how he should just *listen* and *do what he's told* and he wouldn't have to work as hard, and Tommy realizes that he just might believe his coach if not for the fact that the happiness that hockey team and those snowboarders give him is more than anything. He can't be doing the wrong thing by being happy.

His hands, clasped behind him, find the bruise just to the side of the small of his back. Without thinking of it, he presses down on it, and the pain is just a slight ache, just enough to clear his mind.

He was *happy* when he got this mark. He was dizzily happy. He can't remember the last time he was so joyous. His coach has no idea. Has not a single clue about this mark or how they make him feel- how when he isn't on the ice, he's warmer than ever, draped in hockey clothing like he belongs. Fed and rested and warm.

His coach can *say* that Tommy shouldn't have them, but he doesn't have the right. Tommy will endure anything to keep them. As long as they want him, Tommy will fight to stay, and that's something his coach can't take from him.

The first thing he does when he's finally let off the ice and is back in the village is go looking- not for a bed, or some food, but for his *friends*.

They're on the rink, practicing, and as much as it makes Tommy tremble to have to walk anywhere near the ice again, he slips inside quietly, and watches for a moment. He goes unnoticed for a total of thirty seconds before Quackity sees him and nearly crashes into George's back trying to wave at him.

"Tommy!" He yelps, and the rest of them all look his way, their eyes huge. "Tommy, we haven't seen you all day- where have you been?"

He opens his mouth, then closes it, unsure how to answer. He doesn't think they'd like to hear where he's been. He's not sure they'd be happy about that.

"Guys. Get back to the drill. Leave Tommy alone." Tommy looks up to the bleachers where Phil is sitting, an open binder on his lap and a clipboard by his side. "Hello, Tommy. It's nice to see you. Do you want to sit in? I could use an assistant coach for this actually."

He nods slowly, then climbs up carefully, aching aware of his shaky limbs.

"You alright there?" Phil asks, eyes flickering up and down Tommy's form. "You seem stiff."

Tommy shrugs. "Practice."

"Ah. Well, I'm not gonna make you get on the ice, I promise." He says easily. "Make sure you take

a nice warm bath tonight, so you're not feeling that in the morning, yeah?"

Tommy nods. "What are they doing?"

"They're *supposed* to be going over defending with their bodies, but they're completely distracted." Phil says loudly, and they all scramble a bit on the ice. Tommy winces.

"Sorry, I can go if I'm-

"No." Phil says firmly. "Absolutely not. No, you being here is an incentive, actually. Guys! If you don't get yourselves together, I'm making Tommy leave!"

It's almost comical how quickly they begin to run the drill.

"See," Phil whispers, grinning behind his hand now, "You're my secret weapon. I could use you in all my practices."

Tommy giggles, and Phil seems to light up at the sound. They sit there together, watching the practice. Occasionally, Phil shows Tommy what they're working on by drawing it up on his clipboard and explaining it. His voice never raises or insinuates that Tommy isn't smart for not understanding on the first explanation. And even when he tests Tommy, just for fun, he listens to Tommy's complete answer, no matter how hesitant. He never cuts Tommy off or makes him feel awful for trying.

When he gets it right, he even offers Tommy gentle praise with no additional cutting remark.

It's amazing. After a long, *long* day, this is the perfect place for Tommy to be.

"You cold, mate?" Phil asks suddenly, making Tommy look over, confused. "Your hands. They're shaking." And they are, as they always are. Tommy can't remember the last time he's had steady hands. He tucks them into his sleeves, ducking slightly in embarrassment.

"No, I- they do that. Sorry." Tommy apologizes.

"Why are you saying sorry?" Phil frowns. He holds out a hand. "Here, look."

Tommy does. Phil's hands shake too. Not as much as Tommy's but still. The tremble is there. Tommy can see himself in it.

"Nerves," Phil says. "I'm not as tough as I look."

Tommy takes a breath. Then, quietly, he admits, "me either."

"I also have to admit to not taking care of myself the way that I should." He continues, sighing. "Sleeping and eating and drinking plenty of water. Coming here, it's a lot of stress, and for me, it's very easy to forget to do these basic things. But they're just as important as the practice. It's just another type of preparation."

Oh. Tommy's never thought about it like that before.

"I'm not very good at it either," Tommy says. "Sometimes I forget and sometimes I-"

He stops himself.

Phil looks over. "Sometimes you what?"

Tommy shakes his head. Phil doesn't push.

"That's the hard part I guess," he continues, as if Tommy wasn't just- *weird*. "Remembering to care about ourselves the same way that we care about our sport."

Tommy thinks about that for a while.

When the practice ends, the second Tommy is off the bleachers, he's got them all swarming up to him, Wilbur leading the pack. He steps back a bit, overwhelmed, but George grabs the back of Wilbur's hoodie, nearly choking him.

"Stupid fuck," George says matter-of-factly. "If you want a hug, you need to *ask first*."

George lets go, and Wilbur rubs at his neck, throwing a glare at him before straightening. He smiles at Tommy, and, with colored cheeks, goes, "hey Tommy. Missed you. Can I have a hug?"

"Me too?" Quackity peeks from under Wilbur's arm.

"Me first," Sapnap demands, clambering over all their gym bags.

Tommy gives a small smile, and nods. "Yes, but Techno first."

They all groan, but Techno, who was sitting there, just watching in amusement, laughs. He opens his arms and Tommy hugs him, letting himself be wrapped up. Then, he goes around to all of them, letting them all cling on for a bit. Tommy would pretend that he isn't pleased, but he's never gotten so many hugs in his life, so he couldn't possibly.

The last one is Schlatt, who hugs for the longest and tucks his chin against the top of Tommy's head like he's planning to take a rest like that- with Tommy held in his arms.

"Missed you, kid." He says gruffly. "Don't disappear like that again, alright?"

Tommy hums, squeezing slightly. An apology and an agreement all in one.

When he pulls away, Schlatt hands him his sweatshirt and makes him put it on because apparently, Tommy's damn near freezing and it's freaking him out. Tommy isn't, but he tugs it over his head immediately, grinning at the softness it provides.

Schlatt's eyes gleam when he sees him, and he reaches out to ruffle Tommy's already ruined hair. "There you go, kid. Warm now?"

"Warm," he confirms. And *tired*. And *hungry*.

Thankfully, Quackity reaches over and grabs Tommy's hand, lightly pulling him towards the door. "Come on, *Tomas*, you've missed the drink-of-the-day, and also, I need to tell you about every little bit of *drama* that happened this morning. Talk and walk with me, your favorite."

Tommy laughs. He neither confirms nor denies, but he lets Quackity take him wherever he wants as the rest of them follow behind.

Later that night finds Tommy taking the sweatshirt off, pulling it over his head and carefully folding it. He treasures everything they let him borrow, as someone who hardly ever gets things- especially things like this. Warmth directly from them, it means more than a lot.

He places it down on top of his bag, but when he turns away, he sees a folded piece of paper on the

floor. He frowns, then reaches down to pick it up. It must have come from inside the pocket of the sweatshirt, because it isn't Tommy's.

He debates himself internally for a moment before he unfolds it, unable to help himself.

He looks at it for a long minute before he finally processes what he's seeing.

It's a T-graph, with the left side reading *just a kid* and the right side reading *stuck up asshole*. Under the *just a kid* side are three signatures- George, Quackity, and Wilbur- and on the *stuck up asshole side* are Sapnap and...Schlatt.

It's a bet. It's a bet on *him*. Whether he's just a kid or a stuck up asshole. They signed it and made it before they knew him, and-

Oh.

That means that Wilbur finding him crying in the dance studio and then deciding to learn to figure skate- it was all a *ploy*. It was all a trick to get to know Tommy better. Without this, Tommy would have gone these weeks alone and as cold as ever- with no one ever noticing him. He thought someone was finally starting to *care* about him, that he could possibly *belong* somewhere, but none of it was real.

Everything , Tommy thinks, holding back stinging tears, *was a lie*.

Numbly, he folds up the letter and then lays it on top of the sweater, and attempts to get himself ready for bed.

Everyone in this room got here somehow and everyone will have to leave . So what's next?

...

Tommy doesn't come to breakfast the next morning. They all sit, leaving open a space in between Techno and Wilbur. Sapnap piles a plate high of his favorites, even though they all expect him to manage about half, and Quackity grabs him a drink- blueberry explosion smoothie. They've been slowly making their way through all the options so Tommy can pick his favorite. Drink-of-the-day. It's blueberry day.

They talk quietly, each eying the door, waiting for Tommy to appear. Waiting for Tubbo and Ranboo, with Tommy walking a bit behind them. Him in his too large sweater, with his hands hidden, with his steps careful.

They wait, and they wait, and they *wait*.

Schlatt is the only one brave enough to say what they're all thinking when people around them begin to pack up and leave. "Kid's not coming."

"His coach wouldn't have him up before breakfast after he spent all yesterday training, would he?" Quackity asks. Techno and Wilbur exchange dark looks.

Sapnap stands abruptly. "Fuck this. *Fuck* this. I'm going to get him. I'm- I'm gonna pull him off the ice if I have to. I don't fucking care."

George stands next. He doesn't speak, just nods once. He's with Sapnap. Good.

"You can't punch an Olympic coach," Techno warns. "What are you going to do? Because if you get us tossed out of here, then we can't help Tommy at *all*."

"It's *blueberry* day," Sapnap says back. And it makes no fucking sense, but he feels wild right now. None of this makes sense. Why Tommy? Why did he, of all people, have to have this bitch of a coach? He bets this place is crawling with people who've done worse versus Tommy, who has *never* done anything wrong in his life. "I'm not fucking leaving him to fight for himself, Tech. Come with me or don't, I don't give a fuck. I'm not leaving a teammate out on the ice alone."

Then he turns and leaves, not stopping to see who is following. When he hits the hallway though, he can tell- all of them are at his back, and something inside of him eases. His team, behind him. *With* him. Going to get their own. As it should be.

"What's your plan?" Schlatt asks, a bit more urgent than normal. "You better fucking have a plan, cause you're in charge for this one, man."

"My plan is whatever it takes," Sapnap growls. "I'm not leaving without him. Not unless he makes me."

"That is not a plan," Quackity hisses, but Sapnap doesn't care. When he hits the double doors of the rink, he slams them open, storming down to the ice. It looks empty for a moment, but then there's the familiar sound of blades cutting through the cold.

Tommy skates into view, and Sapnap will have to admit to being takenaback. It's weird seeing him in his own clothing for once- Sapnap got used to seeing their team colors across Tommy's back and falling from his shoulders. Not this form fitting black turtleneck, which is *boring* and standard and is nothing like the Tommy that he's grown to know and love.

Tommy looks at him, at them all, and for a brief moment, surprise passes over his expression, then confusion, and then it's all schooled, blank. Sapnap decides not to feel hurt.

"Tommy," he starts, about to ask what the hell he's doing, when his coach skates in from the other side of the rink, sliding right in front of Tommy.

"Hello," he says, sickly sweet, "how can I help you all today? I assume that it's urgent given the fact that you've just interrupted my skaters' scheduled practice time."

Sapnap straightens. "We want to talk to Tommy."

The coach looks unimpressed. Sapnap thinks he'll turn them away, but then, a sadistic smile crosses the man's face. "You know what? Tommy? Come."

Tommy skates over. Sapnap tries to look him in the face, just to see if there's anything at all hidden away in his blue eyes, but he keeps them down.

"Tommy, these hockey players somehow think it's their *place* to demand your attention and pull you away from your much-needed practice." He says. "They want to *talk*. What do you think about that?"

Tommy looks over at his coach questioningly.

"Speak freely," he permits. Behind him, Sapnap can hear George take a very, very deep breath.

"Tommy," Sapnap says, voice dipping into worry now that he doesn't have to think about intimidating the coach. "Tommy, is everything okay?"

Tommy blinks at him once, with wide, wide eyes- panicked. Confused. Then they narrow slightly, as if upset. As if he's distrusting. He lifts his chin, and says, with a shaky, but firm voice, "I'm in the middle of practice. Leave."

"What?" Wilbur says, pushing to the front. "No, listen, Tommy, if you need help-"

"I'm getting help." Tommy says. "Help winning gold. I don't-" he takes a deep breath. "I don't *need* anything else."

"Tommy, but-"

Beside him, his coach checks his watch absently. Without looking, as if he can sense it, Tommy tenses. Becomes more urgent. "Go." He demands. When he puts his hands on the rink edge, they're shaking. "Go. I'm telling you to leave."

"Tommy, please," Sapnap steps forward, tries to put his hands over Tommy's, if for nothing, then to quell the shake, but Tommy rips his hands away, skates back a few steps. For good measure, he turns away so his back is to them.

Because of the turtleneck, they all can see his shoulders rising and falling. They can all see how heavy he's breathing. How *distressed* he is. He wasn't like this before. He wasn't- something had to have happened. Something bad.

"Please," Tommy whispers, head back down, even when his back is to them. His breathing is controlled now. "Please leave. *Please*."

It's the most heartbreaking sound Sapnap has ever heard.

The coach smirks. "You heard him. Leave. Go on. The ice will be free in- oh, two hours or so. Give or take a few minutes. You did take a good chunk of *my* time away. But don't worry, the only person who'll be making it up is him." Then he barks, "Tommy, triple axel."

Tommy skates off. The coach doesn't even look, but still Tommy does it, in what seems to be perfection. Quick and high and smooth. Graceful and beautiful and so right that it almost seems unreal.

"Again," he says. "Do it quick this time? Not whatever that was." Tommy's chest heaves once, twice, and then he takes off again. Sapnap wants to throw up.

"Aw, look at what you've all done. Hurting him just by being here." The coach leans forward, his grin sharpening. "Maybe- just maybe- you should listen to him and *leave*. And think about not coming back, yeah?"

Sapnap's fists curl and he is about to start forward, but a large hand grabs his shoulder, stopping him. Technoblade.

"We're going." He says. And that's his *that's the final call* voice. He's in charge now- Sapnap's brief stint as team captain ended in a failure. "Tommy, if you need me, you know where to find me. For anything and everything."

Tommy, curving around the ice awaiting instructions, doesn't look over. His coach rolls his eyes.

If Techno didn't pull him out of there, Sapnap might be knocked those things right out the man's head.

...

Tommy is on the ice, and on the ice, and on the ice.

He does sits spins, and when he is told, he pulls his body into whatever shape looks the best. Distantly, he aches, but since it's distant, it's fine to ignore. Around and around and around, and when he pulls himself out of it because he can't take another second, his coach is the only thing he sees, scoffing.

"You used to be able to do many more revolutions than that," he says. "And then what happened? Go on, tell me."

It takes Tommy a bit to find his voice- he's losing it again. He only talks when he's on the ice. When he's told to. So now it's harder and harder for him to speak.

"I got distracted," he answers and his coach doesn't scoff or roll his eyes, so Tommy gleans that his answer was somewhat correct.

"And what is it that distracted you?"

Tommy doesn't have to think before answering this. "Other people."

" *Friends*, as you called them," he sneers. "They were the ones that distracted you from your goal. Pulling you around everywhere except where you needed to be. Do you really think any of them cared about you? Really?"

Tommy swallows. He's not supposed to answer. He's glad, because he still doesn't know which answer is correct- no and yes are fighting to win in his head. He just wants someone to tell him the right answer. He can't make the effort to decide for himself.

"No," his coach continues. "No, they didn't. Friends don't pull you away from what you've been working on your whole life. Friends don't stop you from doing the things that you *know* are right, in order to have fun. You are at the Olympics. You have a once in a lifetime opportunity. They are making you *weak*."

And Tommy believes him. How could he not? Before, he could be on the ice for hours and hours and feel nothing but his arms burning and his knees aching. Before, he could wake up and go to stretch and not think about anything else except his routine. Before, he was able to drift through life numbly and not need to take any extra time for things like being *tired*, or being *anxious*, or being *sick*. Before, all of that was just a mental hurdle that Tommy could clear easily.

Now though, even sitting here, listening to his coach- he's hungry, he's exhausted, he feels like his heart *hurts*. He's in pain, always. They taught him how to feel, gave him what they thought he was missing, and then they *left* him, made him realize all of it was *fake*- the pain and toil from that is a million times worse than if they just left him to be numb forever. At least then Tommy wouldn't know what he's missing, at least then Tommy wouldn't miss something he can't ever have again.

"This," his coach opens the gate, comes out onto the ice, "cannot happen again. It *will not* happen again. You don't get friends. If you want company, you must earn it. Even mine."

Tommy looks up sharply at that, panic seizing him. If his coach leaves him, if he decides that Tommy isn't worth all the hard work anymore, then what will he do? He can't skate on his own. All his success is his coach's. He's no one without him.

"Please," he says, speaking out of turn, but desperate. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The coach raises his eyebrow slowly. More trembling apologies fall from Tommy's lips. After a moment of watching Tommy plead, he sighs loudly, cutting him off. He skates forward, then reaches out a hand, cupping Tommy's cheek.

Tommy holds his breath. He stays perfectly still. He doesn't know what his coach wants from him. If he hit Tommy, he wouldn't say anything. He knows that. They both know that. But would he really do that?

"You're weak again, little trophy," he says softly, and his tone, even though Tommy is terrified, makes him relax. "I'm going to build you back up. We've still got two weeks of pre-practice. You better be ready. There is a lot of ground to cover."

Tommy nods, and his coach pulls his hand away, satisfied. "Good boy. Alright. Go on now, give me the spin that I deserve."

Tommy moves.

They try all that they can to get to Tommy, but he's always by his coach's side. And when he isn't, they have no clue where he is- neither Tubbo or Ranboo do either. It's like he doesn't *exist* when he isn't with his coach, and it makes Wilbur grow more and more anxious with each passing day- each passing *hour*.

Eventually, he has to do something that he never thought he would. He tracks down Tommy's figure skating opponents in the cafeteria.

They're all sitting together, a very mis-matched group of kids that look like they've just been thrown together without anything in common. There's Aimsey, in her bright red hoodie and black beanie, coined the friendliest skater on the ice, Eryn, with his untied hightops and black wool sweater, looking like he's just woken up, and then Beau, all wild black hair and sharp nails, who glares at Wilbur before he even opens his mouth.

"Uh, hi," Wilbur starts. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was just wondering if you all had seen Tommy anywhere?"

Beau glares more. Eryn takes another gulp of coffee. Aimsey smiles.

"Sorry, we haven't," she says cheerily. "We don't really talk to him much."

"No? Why?"

"Well," Beau says, rolling her eyes. "He's not exactly a *talkative* guy. He's more of a win-first ask-questions-later person. Doesn't have much time for us, I'd imagine."

"We all try to practice alone," Aimsey cuts in, damage control voice on. Wilbur knows the sound from anytime Techno speaks. "So the best way to find him would be to find his coach."

Wilbur bites back an angry sigh. "Uh huh. Have any of you *spoken* with Tommy's coach before?"

"Plenty of times," Beau waves. "He's kinda like a PR manager. Freaks me out."

"I think his sweaters are nice." Aimsey shrugs. She picks at her chocolate croissant. "He's never said anything rude to *me*."

"To you," Wilbur repeats.

She pales a bit. "Yeah," she says quietly. "To me."

"If something is wrong with Tom's coach," Eryn says suddenly, not looking at Wilbur, just looking ahead like he couldn't care less, "then someone should *do* something about it. Someone should help him." Then he looks over, his eyes meeting Wilbur's. "No one ever asks enough questions, I think. And they're not asking them to the right people. I don't know where Tom is, but I know that if you're looking, you better find him quick."

Wilbur takes a breath. *No one ever asks enough questions. Not to the right people. You better find him quick.* "Right. Thanks then- sorry for interrupting."

He turns to go, and then-

"Hey, hockey man!"

He turns back. Looks at Beau.

"When you find Tommy, and you beat in his coach, or whatever you stick-bearing men do, tell 'em to come hang with us sometime. He can't go beating us silly on the ice and then not give us the time of day- it's not proper."

Wilbur grins. "I'll tell him you said something. Thanks."

How is Tommy? Quackity had asked. *Please, you room with him. Just tell us how he is.*

In short, the answer was not good. Tubbo thinks that anyone could tell. Someone who's never even seen or talked to Tommy before could tell.

He comes in late and leaves early, and if Tubbo thought he was quiet before, that was nothing compared to now. He seems- *shell-like*. Like he's a carved out hollow of a person. He orders salads up to his room for dinner, and they *would* be the only way they knew he was eating, if he actually ate any of them.

But no, he orders them and they sit on his side table as he *lays* there, on the bed. Tubbo is way out of his depth- he had no idea how to help when he doesn't know what even went wrong.

He urges Ranboo on, pleads with him to try something, because Ranboo is the most delicate person that Tubbo knows and if Tommy needs emotional assistance, then Ranboo would be the one to help. Of course, Ranboo tries. He wouldn't not.

He goes over and sits at the edge of Tommy's bed, reaches out and touches Tommy's leg. He asks, *hey Tommy, your salad is here- if you wanted to eat it? We could bring our dinner up here and have it with you?* But no, nothing.

There's no response, and eventually they have to leave to eat. By the time they come back he's either always gone or his eyes are shut like he's chasing sleep.

How is Tommy? Quackity asked. Tommy is depleted. He's worse than frozen- Tubbo has no idea *what* he is. All he knows is that he hates it and he hates even more that he can't help.

Phil hears harsh voices as he's coming out of one of the side offices, just finished getting off the phone.

Well, not *voices*. One voice. One familiar voice.

"Come on now, dear." Phil peeks around the corner, and sees Tommy standing there, shoulders slumped, shadowed over, and his coach standing in front of him, a sneer on his face. "What were you thinking asking me that? As if you're not grateful for the things that you have."

Tommy blinks rapidly, and Phil is horrified to see the tears clinging to his eyelashes. He doesn't try to speak though, he just stands there- listening to all the vitriol that his coach is spitting, all the *poison* he's pouring.

"Don't push your luck, Tom- you know your place. You know that I can replace you easily. That I don't want you without a medal. If you don't win-

He doesn't finish, but Tommy shudders, clearly knowing how that sentence ends. And judging by everything Phil is seeing, he doesn't need a vivid imagination to fill in the blanks.

He steps out of the shadows, clearing his throat. The coach flinches, as he *should*, but Tommy hardly reacts besides taking a little breath. "Sorry, I don't mean to...interrupt, but I was wondering- as the coach of the ice hockey team, I was hoping to catch you to talk about your practice times. I think if we got together, we could really work on splitting them evenly between us- or at least you sharing your rink space with one of the other figure skaters? Just to balance it all out."

"Balance it all out?" He repeats.

"Yeah, I mean, you don't want to work your player to death before the events actually *start*," Phil says, grinning in that passive aggressive way he's had to learn from his years of doing this.

"I don't like what you're implying."

"There is no implication," he waves. "I'm just stating what I see. And what I see is a crowded practice rink schedule. Maybe it works for you, but it certainly doesn't for me. I would hate to have to go to the officials about this."

He purses his lips in distaste, clearly thinking that through. Whether Phil is bluffing, whether he has an alternative motive. Phil keeps his smile light and easy. Nothing to see here. Just a coach trying to win gold for hockey.

"...fine," the man concedes eventually. "I'll let go of two slots. Early morning and late night. If that doesn't work for you, oh well." He turns without hearing Phil's reply. "Come on, Tom."

Tommy doesn't immediately start following him out though. His hands, which are folded together in front of himself, tighten.

"Tommy?" Phil questions. He's got a million questions, but the most important comes first- "Are you alright?"

"Thank you," Tommy whispers. It doesn't escape Phil's notice that he doesn't answer.

"Tommy...if you need help-

"I'm okay."

"But if you-

"I'm okay. Thank you sir."

"Phil, please. Call me Phil, Tommy." He insists. He wants to ask- *come on, remember me? Remember yourself?* But he can't.

Tommy shakes his head. He doesn't look up. "Sir. I'm sorry, I should go."

"Tommy--"

But he's gone.

Tommy thinks really hard about it.

About going back to one of them, knocking on any of their doors, and asking for them to help. He's *so* exhausted but he just can't sleep. He can't do it on his own. He just needs one of them near him. He'll settle for anything- curling up at Schlatt's back, or tucking into Sapnap's hoodie, or even laying with his head in Wilbur's lap, like he did before everything went all sideways. He had absolutely no clue how good he had it.

He doesn't even care that they might be making fun of him- the bet and the list and the name's signed under *stuck up*- he probably deserves it anyway.

Tommy'll do anything, brave anything, for the ability to sleep like he used to.

He, when he's just drifting around waiting for his next practice session, finds himself standing at Techno and Wilbur's closed door, his hands and knees trembling, wishing he could just knock and fall down at their feet- but he can't. He just can't make himself.

On top of being a failure, he's also a coward, and after just another minute of standing there staring at wood, he goes back to his room and lays in bed, staring at the ceiling until it's time for practice.

The voice wants to be a hand and the hand wants to do something useful. What did you really want? Someone to pass this with me.

...

Techno can hear them yelling from all the way down the hall, so he rushes to the commons, and when he gets there and sees Wilbur with his fists balled into Schlatt's jacket, yanking and tugging and growling, he's not even surprised. It was bound to happen eventually with them all getting more and more anxious and testy. It was building up and up and up. Every time they saw Tommy and the way he just grows more and more distant and more and more pale- there was bound to be a breaking point.

"What the fuck did you do? What the fuck did you do-" Wilbur growls.

Schlatt glares. He's lax, letting Wilbur throw his fit for now, but Techno knows his anger lies right below the surface, easy to reach whenever he needs it. If he has to deal with much more of this, he *will* strike back. "Let go of me, Soot, or else you'll be on the floor before you can blink."

"Hey." Techno barks, startling them both. "What the fuck is happening?"

George, sitting slouched in the armchair, grins sharply, his eyes flat. "The girls are *fighting* ." Standing behind him, shifting nervously, is Quackity, who looks one minute away from calling Phil.

"George, shut up." Techno says. George shrugs. Techno turns back to the two idiots who are picking a fight with each other. "Wil." There's a pause. Wilbur keeps glaring at Schlatt. " *Wil*. "

Finally, Wilbur lets him go, and Schlatt rolls his eyes, brushing his hands down his jacket. "Drama fuck."

Immediately, Wilbur turns, ready to strike again, but Techno catches him. " *Relax* , Wilbur. You both wanna get on the ice? Cause if you want I can let you fight this out on the ice."

"Let's go," Schlatt bites, "I'll run you over."

"Don't fucking test me, mate," Wilbur promises darkly.

Gently, but firmly, he pushes Wilbur into the chair next to George and glares over at Schlatt. Without a word, he lifts his hands and sits down next to Sapnap, opposite them. Techno sighs loudly, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. Children. He's the team captain of *children*.

He opens his eyes again, collected now, and crosses his arms over his chest. "Alright. Now tell me. What the fuck happened?" Schlatt and Wilbur both open their mouths, but Techno quickly adds, "George. What happened?"

"Wilbur blames Schlatt for whatever he did to make Tommy ignore us," George reports swiftly.

"As if I would *ever* hurt that kid." Schlatt snaps.

Wilbur scoffs loudly, "oh, you and Sapnap didn't like him from the *beginning* ."

Sapnap speaks up then. He's been uncharacteristically quiet since that one interaction they had with Tommy. Techno keeps meaning to check in with him, but-

"We didn't even *know* him. Neither did you. And I think that it's pretty fucking clear at this point that I'd rather get tossed out of here than to ever hurt that kid."

"He looks awful, Tech." Quackity speaks up, voice quiet and shaky. George tenses. "Have you *seen* him? He's like a walking zombie."

Techno closes his eyes. Takes a breath. His team pauses with him, breathing alongside him. He *has* seen Tommy- his image flickers behind Techno's eyelids when he sleeps. Tommy, following behind his coach with his head down and his eyes dull. Tommy, looking dead on his feet, walking to the rink and not coming back out. Tommy, Tommy, Tommy. Always tired, always quiet, always sad.

After a moment, he speaks. "I have seen him. I have. But he doesn't want to talk to us and we *promised* him that we would never do something that he wasn't comfortable with. If we go back on that promise, we're just as bad as his coach." He lets that sit for a moment, then adds, "I just wish I knew *why* he was so upset with us. Things were good."

Schlatt winces. "Uh- boss, we might. Know, that is." And now he looks sheepish and a bit guilty. Techno resists the urge to sigh.

"What happened?"

"Tubbo came by the other day. Said the kid wasn't sleeping. Said he was hardly eating. Said- said he would lay in bed with my-" Schlatt exhales roughly, "-my sweatshirt."

God. Techno's chest hurts. "Yeah?"

"When he came by, he said he wasn't trying to snoop, but he found this in Tommy's things." Schlatt digs into his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper.

Technoblade doesn't need to see it to know what it is. He sighs heavily. That damn bet. Fucking *stupid*. He knew it was stupid when they did it, but he didn't stop them, because he thought nothing would come of it. How was he supposed to know they'd meet Tommy and love the kid as if he was their own?

"Throw that shit out. Now." He orders. Schlatt crumples it instantly. Techno looks around the room at the lot of them. "I'm going to go get our kid. Sapnap, Q, I need you to go get your room ready- I wouldn't be surprised if he passes out the minute he lays down."

"What do we do?" Wilbur asks anxiously.

"You need to clear out," He says. He knows Wilbur won't like it but-

Wilbur's eyes widen. "What? Techno, but-"

"Especially you two. If I can convince Tommy to come back to us, I don't want you two scaring him off."

And to that, Wilbur can't say anything in response. The last thing *any* of them want is to hurt him.

Schlatt stands, taking an audible breath. "Come on Soot." He offers. "Let me buy you a drink."

"I hate your guts."

"Yeah, well," Schlatt rolls his eyes. "Who doesn't. Come on George."

Wilbur gives in and goes and George stands, patting Quackity's shoulder before he follows Wilbur out. Schlatt stops, though, before he leaves the room.

"Call me," he says lowly. "When he's safe. Please."

Techno knows that Schlatt rarely makes requests, and rarely says please. He's begging, basically. Techno can tell.

"First thing," Techno reassures. "As soon as I know, you'll know."

When Tommy finishes running through his routine, he doesn't need to wait for his coach to say anything before he pulls himself back into starting position.

His coach, surprisingly, looks pleased with Tommy- with Tommy's initiative.

"Go on, snowflake, run through." And off Tommy goes. He's exhausted, achingly so, but not tired enough. Not yet.

He doesn't *have* his safety naps anymore. There isn't anyone waiting to pull him away, to cup a hand against the back of his neck and guide him to bed. There isn't anyone to watch his back while he rests or pull him into a hug, or just *be* with him. He's back where he started, alone and scared always, but now, he can't sleep. He's got to work to sleep- skate hard and hope that when his head hits the pillow, his body knocks him out.

His coach is happier, and Tommy is skating harder, so maybe it's good. Maybe this is how it should be. Maybe his hands are meant to tremble, maybe his chest is meant to be tight, maybe he's not meant for happiness.

He lands all the jumps and curls around and does his ending flourish- holding it for the music.

"Hold that." His coach says, and Tommy stays, his arms in the air, breathing heavily through his nose. It hurts. It aches. It *burns*. But Tommy doesn't dare move. And then, his coach comes out onto the ice, skating close, and Tommy doesn't dare breathe.

The coach circles him, looking close for any imperfections. "They'll be judging you from start to end. Everything matters." Tommy's heart feels like it's about to run out of his body. "I want straight lines. Stop *shaking*."

Tommy, who knows from Phil that the shaking is from lack of sleep, anxiety and not taking care of himself, wants to cry. He'd sleep if he could- he'd rest if he was allowed. He can't though, and he won't until this is all over. He won't be able to stop shaking until he gets gold.

His coach sighs, disappointed. "Hm. Not good enough. But, I suppose that this is the best you can give me." He skates around and slowly, slowly, backs off the ice. Tommy doesn't move, because he hasn't been told to.

"Take the night off, sweetheart," he says, and it's cruel, as he knows that Tommy's having a hard time sleeping. Having a hard time *relaxing*. Tommy wants to ask him to *please, please, make me do another set, work me until I can't. Don't leave me to stare at my ceiling all night*. "You don't deserve it, but because I'm so nice, I'll give it to you."

"Thank you," Tommy whispers, trembling, arms still above his head. *Straight lines*, he thinks, *straight lines*.

His coach turns away, grinning, and the second the doors shut, Tommy collapses. His knees hit the ice, and he bends in half, pressing his forehead to the solid coldness. He's struggling for breath, struggling to control the way his chest is rising and falling. His sweater feels like it's choking him- squeezing the life out of him.

He's dying, he's *dying*, and he can't decide if it's a bad thing or not.

The door opens, and a voice calls, "Tommy? Tommy? Are you here?"

Technoblade?

Tommy curls up tighter- he doesn't want anyone to see him like this. But of course there's nowhere to hide on the ice. Ever.

"*Tommy?*" Techno says again, sounding panicked. He hears the gate open, and suddenly the man is skidding out onto the ice, kneeling down at Tommy's side. A light, worried hand brushes the small of Tommy's back and Tommy wants to sob. "Tommy, Tommy, breathe, kid. Breathe."

Tommy knows he's being clingy, and needy, and doesn't deserve it- especially after ignoring them all week- but he reaches out and grabs Techno's hoodie, and immediately, once Tommy does, the man pulls him close, wrapping Tommy up in his arms.

"Techno," Tommy says, *begs* - for what, he doesn't know. "Techno, Techno, please."

"I'm here, Tommy. I'm here. Please, breathe."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he continues, pressing his face further into Techno's hoodie. He doesn't want the man to leave him here. He doesn't care anymore whether it's all fake, he just *needs* help. He doesn't need their care, he'll settle for their pity.

"You have *nothing* to apologize for," Techno says firmly, pulling Tommy in closer. "Nothing at all."

And under this reassurance, because Technoblade, for everything that's happened, has never lied to him, Tommy finally feels something inside of him, held back for years and years, cracks right down the middle and rushes out. It comes out in a flood of tears, near-silent and shaking, holding Technoblade like he's going to be peeled away.

Techno doesn't move the whole time- the ice must be cold and uncomfortable on his knees, and Tommy must be annoying the longer he goes on- but Techno never tells him to stop. He just rubs Tommy's back soothingly, and whispers reassurances that he's alright, they're both okay, and they *will* be okay.

Tommy cries himself out, sitting there in the man's arms. Maybe not all the way, as he's got a lifetime full of tears stored in his reserves, but just enough that he can finally breathe and school himself.

"Sorry," he snuffles, suddenly overwhelmed with shame. He unclenches his hand from where it's balled in Techno's hoodie. He wants to throw up when he sees the wrinkle left behind- there he goes, ruining yet another beautiful thing. "I didn't mean to- sorry. You need to go."

"Did I say that I needed to go?" Techno asks.

"No?" Tommy says hesitantly, too confused to see where he's going with this.

"Then I'm fine right here." He says firmly. "You need me here, you *want* me here, so I will stay. That is never too much to ask, or too much to give."

Tommy nearly starts crying again. He doesn't, but it's right there, just under the surface.

"Do you mean it?" He asks, because he has to. He saw the list. He saw the bet. He didn't see Techno's name, but still, he needs to know.

"Always." The man says, firm beyond anything. "I always did. I always will. And so do those knuckleheads, they're just fucking stupid. They've been a wreck this whole week, Tommy, thinking that they hurt you. That bet...I'll let them explain, but just know that we *love* you. I know you told us to leave, but I couldn't just- if you needed help-"

He stumbles a bit, and Tommy realizes that he doesn't need to hear more. It's real- it's been real.

"I do." He blurts, then clamps his hand over his mouth in shock. Techno stares at him.

"Sorry?"

Slowly, very slowly, Tommy peels his hand off his face. He takes a deep, deep breath. "I think that I do need some help. Sorry."

Techno softens. "Don't say sorry. Just let me help. I *want* to help. I'm going to help. That, I promise." Tommy's breath hitches again. Then Techno changes gears, brushing a hand through Tommy's hair. "You've been working, huh, kid?"

Tommy, finally something close to safe in his arms, droops. He's so tired. He's so, so, tired. He wants to drop fully. He can't, but God, he wishes he could. He wishes someone would catch him. "You haven't slept well since we last talked, have you?"

"Sorry," he whispers. Hesitantly, he recurls his trembling fingers into Techno's shirt. He thinks that's okay. He wants to hide here until it's all over. He doesn't want this anymore.

"It's not your fault, kid. Come on, Tommy." Techno says gently. "Let's get you to Sapnap, yeah? How does that sound? A little nap?"

Tommy looks up, eyes wide. "Please," he begs before he can stop himself.

"Alright, alright," Techno soothes. He lets go of Tommy to stand up, and then reaches down, offering his hand. Tommy takes it, and he laces their fingers together- Tommy's thin pale ones in Techno's tan strong ones. "Let's get off this ice."

Tommy can't follow him fast enough.

The kid already looks league better just when Techno opens the door.

Sapnap is pacing when it opens, but he stops when he sees Tommy. He almost rushes forward before he catches himself. And then, both of them, Sapnap and Tommy, apologize to each other at the *exact* same time. It's funny, and sad, because neither one of them should really be the ones feeling guilty.

"I should've left when you told me to," Sapnap says, all jittery, like he's been waiting to get this out for a week now. "I shouldn't have stayed. I was being fucking stupid and I'm sorry if I got you in any more trouble."

Tommy sighs tiredly. "I'm always in trouble. Now I'm just tired."

"You should shower," Techno advises. "Warm shower for your muscles. I'll find you some clothes. And water. Maybe a snack. Just to cover all our bases."

"Bathroom's right there-" Sapnap points. "I can get you a towel, and a-" he stops. Tommy's just grabbed him, and hugged him, leaning on him and pressing his face into Sapnap's shoulder. Sapnap tears up before carefully hugging him back.

"Thank you," Tommy whispers, then he pulls away and hurries into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him, leaving Sapnap standing there dumbly.

"You out of commission, Sap?" Techno asks, amused.

Sapnap shakes himself. "I'm cool. I'm cool. I'm so- I'm like a cube, man. In the drink. I'm cool. That's my kid and I'm cool."

"Sure." Techno chuckles. "Go on then, get the towel."

Tommy comes out of the bathroom a little while later, dressed in whatever clothes they could find. Wilbur's stuff fit the closest, but it was still big enough on him that he didn't seem entirely uncomfortable wearing it.

(Techno won't say it outloud, but he's happy to see that stupid turtleneck go.)

"I'm so tired," Tommy slurs, leaning this way and that, looking just about to drop right there.

"Come rest then," Quackity pipes up. He made up the bed as best he could, going around all the room and getting every damn blanket that the team has packed on the bed. "You need it, I'm sure."

The fact that it takes zero convincing whatsoever, tells them all a lot. He just drifts over and falls into the mass of blankets, too tired to even care about his own learned timidity.

"Good." Techno says, stepping back. "Good, I'll be back, I'm gonna go get Wilbur and Schlatt to-"

"Techno," Tommy mumbles, reaching out a hand. Of course, Techno stops. He steps forward, frowning. Tommy reaches out and curls his fingers around Techno's wrist. "Thank you. You saved me."

Techno nearly cries. Instead, he reaches out and tousles Tommy's hair. "Sleep, Tommy. I'll be here when you wake up."

Tommy doesn't reply and he thinks he's asleep, so Techno cards one final hand through his hair. Again, he's just about to pull away when Tommy speaks. With eyes lidded and his voice quieter than usual, heavy with sleep, he asks, "you sure you would still want me?"

Techno stops. Sapnap stops. Quackity, across the damn room, stops.

"What?" He asks, his voice tight. He doesn't quite manage to keep the growing anger out of his tone, but Tommy is either too exhausted to note it, or comfortable enough with Techno by now to know it isn't directed at him, because he sighs.

"Without the medal," he explains, blinking long. "Would you still want me? I know I don't deserve it, but I think- I could be good. If you didn't leave. I would try."

Quackity chokes, sliding a hand over his own mouth to catch his sob. Sapnap doesn't look like he's breathing- staring at Tommy like he's never seen the kid before. And Techno? Techno can barely stand. His legs feel like nothing under him. His heart is running a marathon. He can only see red.

Then, Tommy goes, "Tech?" And Techno's vision clears.

He takes a deep, deep breath, and slides the pad of his thumb along Tommy's cheek. "We would want you if you had never heard of ice skating, Tommy. We would want you if you couldn't stand up straight on the ice. He may not, but he doesn't deserve *anything* that you are. Understand? With or without gold, you are precious to us."

Tommy bites his lip. "I don't believe you."

"That's alright." He expected that much. "No worries. We have all the time in the world to prove it to you then, because we aren't going anywhere."

"Oh." Then Tommy smiles dreamily, his eyes fluttering closed. "That sounds nice."

Techno nods. "It will be nice. I promise. Sleep now, okay?"

Tommy hums, and Techno waits, watching for a minute. When he knows that Tommy is sleeping, he turns and heads for the door.

"Hey Tech," Sapnap says.

Techno looks over.

"You kill that coach for me."

Techno grins.

When Technoblade walks up, storming like he's ready to run someone over, Phil already knows what it'll be about. Niki, by his side, pulls away when she sees him coming- smart girl.

"I'll talk to you later tonight, Phil." She says, tucking papers under her arm.

"Of course, Niki, thanks for all your help."

"Anytime." She crosses her fingers. "This will work. I know it."

"I hope, otherwise-" He doesn't finish, but Niki nods in understanding anyway. She slips away and just in time for Techno to stop right in front of him.

"I'm about to do something that might end my career."

"Is this about Tommy?"

"Of course it is."

Phil sighs. "I expected. Look, I've been working on something. I have. You've just got to trust me that-"

"I trust *you* ." He emphasizes. "It's this coach I don't trust. That kid was having a panic attack on the ice today. He was *trembling* , Phil. This man scares him half to death. The only thing he doesn't do to the kid is put his hands on Tommy. And that's probably just because he wouldn't be able to skate hurt."

Phil feels awful. God, he can just imagine it. He can see it and he can see Wilbur having done it. "I hear you, Techno. I do. Just give me a little more time. Just another day."

Techno pauses, his fists curling at his sides. Then, he takes a long deep breath, slowly letting all of his anger settle. "Alright." He agrees. "One day. One single day."

"One day." He repeats. "Until then, take care of them for me. You always do, but please."

Techno nods once, and then turns, making his way back to his room.

Opening the door to Sapnap's room and seeing Tommy there, buried under covers and tucked into Sapnap's chest is the best thing that Wilbur has seen his whole time being at the Olympics.

"Tommy," Wilbur breathes, and he can hear Schlatt, just behind him, sigh in relief. Tommy stirs a little, and Sapnap's arms around him loosen just enough for him to wiggle away if he wants.

Tommy doesn't, but he watches Wilbur and Schlatt with equal wariness.

"Tommy," Wilbur says again, just to say his name and not have the taste of fear stuck to it. Tommy is here, with them, he's safe. His coach won't be able to get him when he's in here. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, I can't imagine-"

"No." Schlatt says suddenly, cutting Wilbur off. Wilbur looks at him, prepared to argue, but he's stunned by the look in Schlatt's eyes- that guilt, that uncharacteristic angry sheen of tears that Wilbur knows only comes when he's pissed at himself. "No, Wil, stop. You didn't do shit and you know it. *I'm* the one who should be apologizing to you, Tommy. That paper? That bet? That was all me, and

I'm sorry. It was fucking stupid, and even worse than that it was cruel. It hurt you and I- If I knew it would've done that, then you have to believe that I never would've written it up."

"I thought-" Tommy starts, stops, his voice failing him. He tries again though, fighting for it. "I thought that it was all...fake. That you didn't mean any of that stuff you said. That I was just fun for you to-"

"Don't," Schlatt bites, pained. "Don't finish that. Please, Tommy, I can't-"

"I have never said anything that I didn't mean, Tommy," Wilbur says. "You are my *friend* and I care so much about you. I was a fucking idiot and ended up hurting you, and if you don't forgive me, then that's okay. I just need you to know that it wasn't on purpose. I would *never* joke about loving you."

"You love me?"

" We love you. And we have from the first time we talked to you."

Tears spring into Tommy's eyes, and this time, he does wiggle out of Sapnap's hold and crawls forward and reaches out for Wilbur. Wilbur immediately indulges, curling his arms around the boy's shoulders and pulling him close.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur whispers, he feels like he's trying to squeeze the apology into Tommy. It's the only thing he can say. All those days Tommy spent alone, this week and every other before it. Wilbur wants to apologize for them all. No one else will. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Tommy says, equally quiet. "I forgive you. All of you."

Wilbur pulls away, his vision blurry. "You're so strong. You're so strong, sunshine."

Tommy pauses, and then Wilbur realizes his mistake. "Shit- fuck, I'm- Jesus, sorry, I just-"

"No," Tommy frowns a bit, looking thoughtful. "You...why do you call me that?"

"Huh?"

"Why do you call me that? Sunshine?"

Wilbur has no clue where to start. *Because I love you? Because it's a nice thing and you don't get many of those, so I want to give you one that no one can take away? Because you bring me joy? Because your existence is a marvel to me?*

And yes, all of those are true, all of them matter, but- Wilbur thinks of that second figure skating practice he had with Tommy. The one where he went spinning across the ice and Tommy laughed- a true, real laugh- or, he thinks of that hockey scrimmage, the one where Tommy pulled himself to his feet and beamed like he just realized he could be happy without punishment. All the small slips, all the ghostly chuckles, all the pieces of quiet joy. Wilbur cherishes them all. Wilbur holds them close to his chest.

"Because," Wilbur answers, a little choked up, "your happiness- it's like the first warm day after a long cold winter. The first rays of sun when you've been freezing. I wish I could see it all the time."

Tommy's eyes widen. "Oh." He's quiet, thinking. "My coach calls me snowflake."

"Well then he's stupid *and* an asshole." He scoffs. "Because you're the brightest thing out there, Tommy. You're not cold or stuck up, and the fact that we ever thought you were- the fact that anyone could think that-"

"Soot, you talk too much." Schlatt grumbles. Wilbur closes his mouth. Then Schlatt leans forward and cups Tommy's cheek. Tommy leans into the hand with a content sigh.

"I'm not good with words," he says. "I'm better with actions. But I gotta say- I've played half of the toughest guys out there. I play *with* the other half. You, Tommy, are the strongest person I've ever met. And it isn't fair, but that doesn't make it any less true."

Then, Schlatt leans forward and presses his lips to Tommy's curls. When he pulls back, Tommy's eyes are wet.

"Oh."

"Yeah, so-" Schlatt coughs awkwardly. "Next time you see some shit that makes you upset, you better come beat my ass. That would fucking hurt less, I think."

Tommy smiles, then sees Wilbur looking and smiles bigger. Yeah, Wilbur was right. Sunshine.

They do nothing all next morning- they order pancakes and bacon up to the room, which they're all packed into, and watch old Olympics clips on the television, marveling over all the other sports that just make no sense compared to their own.

Sapnap insists they watch curling, simply to tease Punz, who is at the Olympics for it, and Techno wants to watch Niki's old snowboarding highlights to see her half-pipe. Wilbur sits next to Tommy, who keeps poking whenever he wants another pancake, or some water or for one of them to try and find clips of Vikk-star's old skate routines. They're all hesitant to make Tommy watch figure skating when he's supposed to be resting, but when Tommy insists that Vikk is the reason Tommy wanted to *be* an Olympian, then they find that they just can't say no.

Especially when he has them pause and then explains why every move he makes was legendary- they have no idea what he's saying, but the excitement in his voice was enough for them to listen intently.

Lunch comes and goes, Schlatt gets them all sandwiches, and it's around then that they all start to feel antsy having done nothing all day. So Wilbur gets up, claps once and then proclaims that it's time for Tommy to finally try hot chocolate.

They're a loud bunch as they head down. The whole lot of them in a circle around Tommy, pretending that they aren't watching their surroundings carefully as they argue with one another. Tubbo and Ranboo are both already waiting for them and when they see Tommy, they perk up and Tubbo full on *shoves* Sapnap out of the way to hug him. Ranboo doesn't even bother apologizing for Tubbo, he just joins their hug, holding both of them.

They order their hot chocolates, and Wilbur sits at the table and watches Tommy's eyes widen at the piling of whipped cream.

"I'm supposed to eat this?" Tommy asks, awed and terrified.

"If you want," Wilbur hands him a spoon. "Try this. And remember, it's hot."

Tommy carefully spoons some of the drink, and blows the liquid. Then he carefully puts it into his

mouth. He drinks and Wilbur waits. All of a sudden, his eyes widen and his face breaks out into a glorious smile.

"Woah!" He says to himself. "That was amazing."

"Yeah, you like it?"

"I *love* it." Tommy nods. Then he turns around in his seat and reaches out to touch Quackity's shoulder. "Quackity, I think I found my favorite drink."

Quackity smiles. "Great choice, Tommy- next battle on the agenda? Your favorite snack. That should stir up some nice debate around here."

Tommy tilts his head. "Why would that-"

"There you are."

Tommy's face pales.

Standing there, staring at Tommy, his arms crossed over his chest, is his coach. His eyes are narrow and his lips are turned upward into a sneer, and Wilbur is standing before he can say anything else, making himself as big as he can to slide in front of Tommy. He *hates* people like this. He hates being in the *way* of people like this. But he'll be damned if he let Tommy take the brunt of anymore shit that he spews.

The coach looks him up and down. "Excuse me, I'm looking to have a conversation with my lazy excuse for a skater. You're in my way."

The chair rattles, and suddenly Tommy is standing too, his hot chocolate forgotten and his head down. "Sorry, sir, I must have lost track of time-"

"Yeah, you lost track of time drinking desserts. What a waste. And with these guys again? Didn't I tell you about them? All they want to do is steer you wrong, sweetheart."

Wilbur opens his mouth, because he can feel one of his teammates shifting behind him, about to kick up a fuss, but then, Tommy's head lifts. His eyes find his coach's.

"No," he says quietly, tremblingly. But still- "no, you're wrong."

"Excuse me?"

"I said that you're *wrong*." Tommy says again, louder this time. "They're my friends. They're not- they only want what's best for me. All of them. They care about me. They- they *love* me."

The coach stares for a moment, and then scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Oh please. How could anyone love you? You think they aren't waiting to get something from you? I made you everything that you are and they're trying to take advantage of that." Tommy falters slightly and he takes the time to reach forward and grab Tommy's wrist. He probably would have pulled him away had Wilbur not held on.

"Get off of my skater before I have you kicked out," He hisses.

Wilbur swallows. "He isn't yours."

"Oh, is he yours then? Did *you* build him up from nothing?"

"No, Tommy is his own. He built *himself* up. And he'd succeed with or without you."

The coach bares his teeth and then lets go of Tommy's hand to jab forward like he's going to push Wilbur. Wilbur pulls Tommy behind him, ready to take whatever- it used to be his job, and he'll do it again- but then Technoblade steps in front, cocks his arm back and punches the man across the face so hard he drops.

He's down in one punch.

"Techno, you just-" Wilbur gapes, almost unable to process what he's looking at. Tommy, peeking around him, looks just as shocked as he is.

Techno turns, shaking out his fist. "He was annoying me. Now he isn't."

"Okay, so all that bullshit about not punching Olympic coaches," Schlatt says loudly, looking entirely too gleeful for the situation. "You were just hogging it for yourself."

"Oh, I'm sorry, you want me to shake him awake so you can get a hit in?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"This is lovely, but Techno, you did just punch a coach." George points out. "There goes our gold medal. And *my* chance to punch him."

"George, you would've killed him," Wilbur says.

"Okay. I'm not seeing the issue."

Wilbur concedes.

"What about your matches?" Tommy asks, brows furrowed. "I didn't mean for you to get into trouble. I should've just-"

Techno shakes his head. "Nope. No, Tommy. No gold medal is worth you suffering, alright? I'll deal with the consequences myself. As team captain, any blame falls onto me and Phil. Phil told me one day, and I waited as long as I could. The rest of you should be fine to play so long as I don't."

"Okay, well, tough, cause we aren't playing without you." Sapnap says. "All or nothing. We all might as well have punched him."

And that's when Phil walks in through the doors. He takes one look at the coach laying out cold on the tile flooring and all his players, Tommy, and Tubbo and Ranboo standing around him and sighs.

"Oh dear," he goes. Then he looks to Techno, knowing it was him without even asking. "You couldn't have waited just a few more hours?"

Techno's face, normally relaxed, twists. "He told Tommy that no one could love him. I took that personally."

Tommy flushes.

"Ah, well, that would do it." Phil looks down at him for another second, then sighs again. "Alright, call the trainer. There are- I don't know- what? Six or seven witnesses here? I mean, I don't know mate, I heard that he swung at Techno first."

"So did I," Wilbur says immediately.

"Same!" Quackity and Tubbo say at the same time.

George nods once, dialing Ponk's number.

"And it was a shitty swing too," Schlatt sighs. "He deserved to be laid out. Picking a fight with a hockey player. What an idiot."

Tommy looks over at Techno, then puts his hand into his, covering his newly red knuckles. It's not verbal- he's probably been as verbal as he could today- but it's loud as anything.

You wanted more. I wanted what everyone wants.

...

The coach gets taken off the roster by the organization. More than that, Phil promises to follow up to make sure that he never coaches figure skating or *anything* at a high level ever again. In addition to the fact that almost swung at a player, Phil and Niki had been working on a case- they had a file thick full of stories from anyone who's seen the man interact with Tommy.

And a *lot* of people have seen them interact. If you ask enough questions to the right people, then you get the right answers.

Ranboo and Tubbo, Ponk, the three figure skaters who divide rink practice time with Tommy and see him before and after events, the security of the Olympics- Charlie, Connor, and Ted- hell even *other players* from different sports entirely. Everyone knows Tommy and by that way, everyone knows his coach.

"Listen," Phil says gently, when he sits down and explains it all to Tommy. "You don't have to say or do anything if you don't want to. Okay? That's the reason that I got this much witness testimony. If it's just one or two people it becomes a he-said, she-said argument, but when it's over ten and they're all saying the same thing? It's much harder to argue."

Tommy nods slowly, waiting for the but.

"But, if you wanted to say something," he offers, "if you wanted to speak up about this, then it would only help. Coming directly from you, about the practices that we couldn't see? That would seal it up, I think."

Tommy frowns, looking down at the table. "I don't know."

"That's okay," Phil soothes. He reaches across the table and offers his hand and Tommy takes it without thinking. "That's perfectly alright. But I want you to know that I have a friend on the council, her name is Kristin, and me, her, Niki- even my friend Sneeg- we're all not going to stop working this until your coach doesn't coach ever again. Okay? The only person who can touch an Olympic level coach is another Olympic level coach with friends in high places."

Tommy nods, tears welling in his eyes. "Thank you."

"You've got people in your corner from all over, Tommy. I'm just sorry no one said anything until now. And of course, if you change your mind at any point, just let me know and I'll hear you out. But I respect if you want nothing more to do with him ever again. He can't hurt you anymore."

And Tommy can only blink, tears slipping down his face. Quietly, he repeats, "he can't hurt me anymore." Then, he smiles, laughing breathlessly. "O-oh."

When Tommy's laughter turns into relieved sobbing, Phil only stands and pulls him into a hug, rubbing his back. He holds him until he stops crying and then after that, he holds Tommy some more.

Because he doesn't have a coach now, Tommy worries that he won't be able to compete, but he's told that if he is okay with being at a slight disadvantage to his opponents, then he can compete all he wants.

Tommy remembers thinking, *it would be more of a disadvantage to actually have him, so- please.*

He says yes, and suddenly, after being controlled all his life, he's faced with so, so many options and possibilities. He has to pick so many things and think over everything, and it's overwhelming. He almost thinks he can't do it, but then-

Tubbo bangs open their door. "Tommy. If you pick Moana, consider this friendship over."

Ranboo slinks in after him, sitting down at the foot of Tommy's bed lightly. "What he *means* is: we're here to help you sort through the music, if you want to."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Tubbo grabs a pillow then sprawls out on the floor, opening Spotify. "I think the other figure skaters wanted to help, but I told them to fuck off."

Tommy's brow furrows. "Wha- why?"

"They could do sabotage, Tommy. I've seen *I, Tonya*. Lani fell asleep halfway through, but I saw the *whole thing*." He says. "Her *knee!* What if they do that to your music?"

Tommy laughs and then carefully lays across the bed, so his head is by Ranboo's side. "I've never seen it."

"We're watching it together." Tubbo demands. Then he falters a bit. "Oh, uh, if you want to, of course."

Tommy smiles, laying his chin on his crossed arms. He doesn't mind being bossed around by Tubbo so much- Tubbo just does that to everyone. "I want to. Sounds fun."

"Watching movies with him actually sucks," Ranboo says. "You think you're having fun until you realize it's awful. And then he tricks you into doing it all over again."

"Stop lying to him," Tubbo demands. "I'm a delight. Aren't I a delight, Tommy?"

Tommy slyly doesn't answer, but he's sure his happy expression tells Tubbo all he needs to know. "What music do you have for me?"

They stay up all night, going from track to track, with Tommy standing up in the middle of the room and trying to imagine the choreography for it. He finally settles on something upbeat and bouncy, and Tubbo cheers, excited to celebrate the first ever music of his choice.

The final week before the events, he's on the ice every afternoon by *choice*. He goes down for his one slot with Wilbur or Quackity or George by his side- they give input into the dances and tell

him what might look cool, but nothing much more than that because Tommy is an expert on the technical stuff already.

George, surprisingly, knows a lot more about figure skating than Tommy thought he did. He's definitely Tommy's favorite to practice with out of all of them- not that he'd ever tell any of them that.

All in all, that week of practice is some of the most fun he's had figure skating on the ice in a long, long time.

After the last practice, Techno carries Tommy off the ice- not because he's so exhausted that he can't walk- just because he asked for it. Tommy, secure on Technoblade's back, grins when the man says, "you're gonna kill it, kid. I just know it. Gold or no gold, you're amazing."

Tommy, this time, doesn't hide his smile against Techno's shoulder. He smiles wide, because he knows it's true.

Wilbur is counting down the seconds.

His hands ache from where they've been gripping his hockey stick and he can just *see* in all his teammates a will for this match to be over *now*. They're already winning by four, they should just call the match and let them leave.

"Last goal, Soot," Schlatt says, skating by, patting Wilbur's shoulder. "Give us one and seal it. Then let's bounce."

And so, Wilbur does. He scores with only three seconds left to spare, and none of them stick around to celebrate their win, and their medal.

They, and Phil too, are too busy hurrying out of the hockey arena to the *other* ice rink.

It's a million leagues quieter over there, so when they all clamber in, it's noisy and noticeable- great for them, because Tommy, who's just stopped in his starting position for his routine, looks up and sees them all.

Schlatt cups his hands over his mouth and yells Tommy's name and George slugs him in the arm.

"This isn't a hockey match, dumbass. Shut *up*. And besides, I thought you didn't get figure skating."

Schlatt shrugs. "I get it now, fuck off."

Tommy still beams anyway. Then he looks down again, schooling his expression.

[The music starts](#) and Tommy starts dancing, moving gracefully across the ice. He lands all of his jumps, securing all his technical points, but Wilbur couldn't care less about that- what really gets him is the gigantic *smile* Tommy has on his face as he skates. He chose his own music and his own costume and now he's just having fun making the art that he wants.

By the end, the music winds down and Tommy throws his arms up into his finishing pose, all smiles, and the crowd erupts into cheers. The loudest, of course, coming from them.

Tommy bends over, bracing his hands on his knees, giving himself a second, before straightening and curving around the ice to wave at the crowds, expertly dodging the little stuffed animals and

flowers they toss down to him.

Phil stands up and starts walking over.

"Phil," Wilbur hisses. "What are you doing?"

"Tommy doesn't have a coach yet," He says. "I'm going over there and giving him his congratulations." He pauses. "Come with me if you want."

Tommy finishes his rounds, and skates over to the gate, and Wilbur gets to see firsthand the way his face brightens when he sees them all standing there, cheering. He actually hurries quicker to them and nearly launches himself at him, into Phil's waiting arms. They all pile around the two of them, chaotic and loud. Wilbur can't imagine how they look to the rest of the world. He finds that he doesn't really care.

His hands keep turning into birds, and his hands keep flying away from him. *Eventually the birds must land.*

...

Tommy wins gold. But everyone saw that coming- at least, that's what the commentators, Puffy and Sam said.

"How could he not have?" Puffy asks. "Oh, he was magnificent. And that *smile*. Sam, I gotta tell you, if you told me we'd get to see Tommy, who's normally a controlled winter storm, all furious and cold, *smile* like- like-"

"Like the sun," Sam provides.

"Yes! Exactly, like the sun. Oh goodness, I would've told you that you're out of your mind, but buy me a seat anyway because I wouldn't ever want to miss that."

"He looked like pure light on that rink, Puffy. Dancing rays on the water. Olympic gold medalist at seventeen? I just can't *wait* to see where he ends up next."

Tommy thinks he's getting used to the stick in his hands. It's a lot to think about- balance and maneuvering and speed- but Tommy thinks by now, after weeks and weeks of hanging out with the team on and off the ice, he's steadier overall.

They're playing for real now, and Tommy, as always, is on Techno's team. Now he knows he's not a hindrance, only an addition- and Techno skates backward to watch Tommy's back as he keeps his eyes on the moving puck. It's easy for him, a figure skater, and leagues more agile than any of them, to wiggle in, sweep the puck away and weave between them towards the goal.

He still loves figure skating- that's *his* sport, and no one can ruin that for him- but he loves a lot of other things now too. Things that he doesn't have to be perfect at, or even *good*. He can be bad at anything he tries and he'd know that he's still just as worthy as he was before. When he snowboards with Tubbo or bakes with Ranboo or sings with Wilbur. It's all fun.

But, still, Tommy's a perfectionist and there's no such thing as an Olympian without an ego, so, yeah, he likes being the best at things-

He skates right past Sapnap's defense and scoots past Schlatt playing keeper. When it goes in, he

swoops around the goal and up the rink, whooping as he whizzes by, a huge smile on his face. He's loud and quick, but still, Phil, who's standing on the outside of the rink with his clipboard, smiles and reaches out a hand for Tommy to hit as he goes by.

"Okay," Sapnap huffs, "what was that you said about not being able to figure skate with a hockey skate? Those were *not* hockey moves."

"He's good," George shrugs simply.

"Proud of you Tommy!" Wilbur shouts, cupping his hands over his mouth. "Good shot!"

Tommy spins on the ice, beaming. Wilbur's proud of him. But more than that, he's proud of himself. And that's important, because he isn't his coach's, he isn't theirs, he is his *own*. And he is worth everything.

End Notes

:DDD

the poem scattered through the fic is called unfinished duet by Richard siken <3

songs I listened to while I wrote this:

deep the water - lewis Watson

mirrorball- Taylor swift

ice skating - Alexander desplat

heavy weather - billie marten

all in -lighthouse

yuri on ice - taro umebayashi

green tea forest - leon chang (Tommy's final skate routine)

Works inspired by this one: [Worked Ice Always Melts](#) by [Brevi](#), [Trapped in your dance](#) by [Bee_lover223](#), [put the hearts \(and bruises\) on ice](#) by [allieae](#), [a cool night in](#) by [mononightmares](#), [breaking the ice](#) by [bluwards](#), [gladiolus crown](#) by [bluwards](#), [Marked by Still Waters](#) by [Morrigan \(COTK95\)](#), [when the night turns cold, my thoughts feel like stone \(and it's nothing i can change\)](#) by [inkstainzed](#), [heart on fire; brain on ice](#) by [f1nchly](#), [Finding Your Footing](#) by [Giacarem](#), [don't cry, snowman, not in front of me](#) by [allieae](#), [Break the ice \(and your bones\)](#) by [fyreb1rd](#), [free \(and i love to be\)](#) by [mangolani](#), [melting the ice](#) by [youreyeslookliketheocean](#), [i can't think straight \(i froze some lava, and i put on my ice skates\)](#) by [inkstainzed](#), [What Defines Worth](#) by [Slothsomething](#), [let's go below zero \(and hide from the sun\)](#) by [allieae](#), [just stop talking](#) by [Giacarem](#), [past the blood and bruise \(leave it all behind\)](#) by [ellis \(ellabellachicketychella\)](#)

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